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Richard Foreman and the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre - In Theory and Practice

by

David Douglas Owen



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Department of Drama

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring 2000





University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Richard Foreman and the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre - In Theory and Practice" by David Douglas Owen in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts.





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# Abstract

This thesis describes the origin and theory behind Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theatre which is one of the most important avant-garde theatres to emerge from the late 20th century. Foreman's theatre works to isolate the moment and show a continual present onstage and was influenced by such people as Gertrude Stein, Bertolt Brecht and Martin Heidegger. Questions concerning the shift in the nature of crisis for his characters, the issue of touring, and the opening of his work to other directors are examined with reference to his recent works and current practices, including his establishment of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre School. My personal experience of producing and directing a Foreman play is analyzed to provide insight into the techniques and goals behind his work. The agenda of encouraging audiences to question how meaning is created is analyzed with the goal of locating his work politically. Recent trends inform my prediction of the future of Foreman's theatre.





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# Introduction

This thesis is the culmination of several years of learning about and using the ideas of Richard Foreman in my own experimentation with non-linear, postmodern theatre. I was first introduced to the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre during my first year of Graduate Studies and was intrigued by Foreman's idea of isolating the moment and frustrating the impulse for the next expected event. I wanted to find out more about these possibilities and try these techniques for myself. I, too, wanted to make the theatre into a form of 'mental gymnasium' where the audience could work-out and gain from the experience. I had been seeking unique and highly stylized work and found it in the aesthetic of this New York avant-garde theatre artist who is still writing, producing, directing and designing his form of theatre today.

Throughout my previous exposure to Foreman through his writings and interviews I noted that he often states he is not a political artist/writer. However, in my reading of the plays the situations presented within them are highly political, even though Foreman tries not to clarify a message or moral position. My understanding of Foreman's desire to call into question the act of perception and the creation of meaning for the audience was, I felt, a political act though outside the usual framework of "political art." In his writings and interviews he is very dedicated to his agenda of "waking up" the minds of his audience and it is this agenda I will locate politically. Within this thesis I address why Richard Foreman wants his audience to question how meaning is created and how he puts it into practice; I define the political agenda behind Foreman's work; and I try to establish the direction the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre is heading towards in the current conservative climate in North





America.

Chapter one examines the three Ontological-Hysteric manifestos he wrote in the early 1970s and relates them to the early production style of his first show, *Angelface*, in 1968, and to other productions that followed. I investigate Foreman's writing, directing and design and delve into the theories behind the Ontological-Hysteric theatre aesthetic which aims at isolating and frustrating the impulse of each moment, moment after moment, to allow the audience to know the "reality" of their experience (ontological) prior to being able to easily assimilate the experience into the constructed framework given them by society (the hysterical present). The influence of Gertrude Stein and Bertolt Brecht on Foreman's ideas, as well as Heidegger's concept of 'enframing' is referred to. Ultimately, the best sources for Foreman's ideas are his three manifestos which have heavily influenced his work as my examination of several productions demonstrates.

Chapter two discusses Foreman's most recent works and how they may be changing compared to the original model set out in the manifestos. The environment for the arts in America has changed drastically since the liberal '60s when Foreman started his theatre. Now, Foreman's theatre tours in an attempt to raise revenue and gain exposure in order to sustain both the work as well as the Ontological-Hysteric theatre school. I look at how his theatre is affected by the conservative corporate environment in contrast with the liberal environment surrounding its inception over thirty years ago. As well, attention is given to the latest critical writings from recent reviews and interviews concerning Foreman and his work to determine whether the focus of his theatre is changing.

Chapter three describes my experience of producing and directing the Canadian



premiere of Foreman's *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* in Edmonton in May of 1999 with Manual Transmission Theatre. The process we used during rehearsals and the production is examined, especially concerning our use of and deviations from Foreman's methods. A discussion of some of Foreman's techniques and the ways we adapted them follows. I conclude by describing reactions to the show including the media response to the challenge of reporting on a show designed to defy easy theatrical definition.

There is an inherent irony in attempting to analyze a non-linear art-form that questions how meaning is created using the linear form required for academic research. This thesis on Richard Foreman and the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre exemplifies this paradox. His theatre works to disrupt a logical flow of meaning and calls into question the act of perception by attempting to create a theatre that shows a perpetual present. In my research I discovered that one of Foreman's greatest influences was Gertrude Stein and her method of 'continually starting again' in her writing. At the beginning of the process of writing this thesis I considered emulating her method to more adequately describe (or recreate) the intent behind Foreman's art. I was warned that even if my attempt was successful it would be brilliant but not academically acceptable. Therefore the structure of this thesis is intentionally linear with the chapters beginning on Foreman's past and the theoretical foundations of his theatre, then moving to his present work to show the development (or stasis) of his most recent works, and then finally describing my own experience with Foreman's script and methods. The greatest challenge I faced was to make my arguments and examples flow smoothly and logically after devoting such attention to Foreman's idea of frustrating the impulse to show infinite possibilities and Stein's method of writing in the present. While still being clear, I wanted my





writing to convey a similar creative excitement to what I feel when exposed to non-linear work such as that of these two artists.

Foreman feels that more can be gained/experienced by frustrating the impulse than one idea or event logically leads to another. He works to expose the boundaries of where language no longer adequately represents the audience's experience/perception of 'reality.' Hence the name of his theatre: "The Ontological-Hysteric." He wishes the audience to know reality (Ontology) in a very immediate and visceral way (Hysterical). The ironic conflict within this thesis is to use a linear form and conventional logic and apply them to define and analyze Foreman's non-linear and non-literal theatre as well as the theories that inform it. However, writing/reading a paper and watching a play are very different activities and though this thesis errs on the side of linear compared to Foreman's plays, the ideas are no less inspiring since they engage with a way of thinking about writing and performance which has been under-exposed..



# Chapter One

## The Origin and Theory Behind the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre

The first production written, directed and designed by Richard Foreman under the label of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre was *Angelface*, produced on the ground floor of 80 Wooster Street in New York's Soho district in 1968. Prior to that Foreman's work had been decidedly mainstream. He graduated from Yale with an M.F.A. in playwrighting in 1962 and moved to New York where he joined both the New Dramatists and the playwriting unit of the Actors' Studio. One of his plays, *Harry in Love* (1965), was optioned by the producer, Helen Jacobson, for production on Broadway. It was later abandoned. Kate Davy states that, "the *Harry In Love* project was Foreman's last attempt to enter the commercial theatre world. The reason, according to Taubin, was not because the project fell through but because the experience of having a play under option was so awful--'He didn't want to live his life that way'" (*Richard Foreman and The Ontological-Hysteric Theatre* 16). During this time in New York, Foreman also avidly pursued experimental film and preferred the challenge it offered to the audience rather than the "audience assault' he sensed in much experimental work" (10) in theatre at that time. With these influences and his reaction against the commercial theatre Foreman decided to "make central to his work the very elements which he had heretofore tried to suppress and exorcize as not being 'weighty, serious, impressive' enough" (14-15). In reference to this break from commercial theatre, Foreman said, "I





wanted a theatre that did the opposite of “flow”--a theatre that was true to my own mental experiences, ie., the world as being pieces of things, awkwardly present for a moment and then either re-presented by consciousness or dropped in favor of some other momentary presentation” (16). It was from this impulse the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre was born. Foreman started writing, producing and directing a steady stream of plays that followed the aesthetic of “momentary presentation” of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. In addition, he wrote and distributed three manifestos for his theatre in which he attempted to explain the ideas behind it and incite his audience/readers to awaken and change.

The following is an excerpt taken from *The Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto I* which was distributed in April, 1972. The format of the quotation approximates Foreman’s formatting of his manifestos in order to accentuate his message.

#### THEATER

The stage. Destroy it carefully, not with effort but with delicate maneuvers.

Why? Heavy destruction vs. light destruction.

What distorts is excellent.

What distorts with its weight.

Distortions: 1) Logic -- as in realism, which we reject because the mind already “knows” the next move and so is not alive to that next move.

2) chance & accident & the arbitrary -- which we reject because within too short a time each choice so determined becomes equally predictable as “item produced by chance, accident, etc.”

3) the new possibility (what distorts with its weight) -- a subtle



insertion between logic and accident, which keeps the mind alive as it evades over-quick integration into the mental system. CHOOSE THIS ALWAYS!

The field of the play is distorted by the objects within the play, so that each object distorts each other object and the mental pre-set is excluded.

### MANIFESTO! (Foreman 68)

In his first manifesto, Foreman is laying the groundwork for describing a system of circumventing conventions - both theatrical and ultimately societal - to keep “the mind alive”. The use of the three distortions provides a reference to focus on in order to define a goal that defies definition. The first distortion, ‘logic,’ is describing the linear, cause and effect model that is epitomized by the form of theatre known as Realism. An analogy would be the logical assertion that for ‘A’ to reach ‘C’ it must pass through ‘B’ as dictated by the order of the alphabet or for a person to leave one room and enter another, they must first open the door linking the two. Later Foreman explains that it is the overexposure to this form of linear theatre which encourages audiences to fall into an even deeper creative sleep.

The second distortion, “chance & accident & the arbitrary” is a reference to the non-linear modernist movements like Dada and Surrealism which Foreman rejects because they too, become predictable as a series of random chances or accidents which subsequently lull the mind away from awareness. He does use the techniques employed by these movements but only as tools for his purposes rather than in adherence to their modernist ideals. He has been quite open about the influence of John Cage in his sound design, the use of Brecht’s ideas, or even at times, of some aspects of surrealism, as in the use of giant potatoes onstage in *Rhoda In Potatoland*. He often cites influences from the various disciplines but it is his





combination and recombination of the techniques - his *postmodern* use of them - that helps him reach the goal described in his next ‘distortion.’

It is the third distortion, “the new possibility” that Foreman hopes to accomplish with his work. By “evading over-quick integration into the mental system” - which means not allowing the audience the easy option of witnessing (and dismissing) the information before them according to their already constructed view of the world - the play will encourage the audience to either escape their “mental pre-set” or mentally fight against the play. This ‘new possibility’ of Foreman’s is not unlike the work of Gertrude Stein, whom Foreman has acknowledged as being a great influence on him. In *What Are Masterpieces*, Stein also delineates a difference between exciting the audience and really thrilling them. Her work and Foreman’s after hers are both aiming for what Foreman calls, “a subtle insertion between logic and accident” (68):

You can tell that so well in the difficulty of writing novels or poetry these days. The tradition has always been that you may more or less describe the things that happen you imagine them of course but you more or less describe the things that happen but nowadays everybody all day long knows what is happening and so what is happening is not really interesting, one knows it by radios cinemas newspapers biographies autobiographies until what is happening does not really thrill any one, it excites them a little but it does not really thrill them. The painter can no longer say that what he does is as the world looks to him because he cannot look at the world any more, it has been photographed too much and he has to say that he does something else. In former times a painter said he painted what he saw of course he didn’t but anyway he



could say it, now he does not want to say it because seeing it is not interesting. This has something to do with masterpieces and why there are so few of them but not everything. (Stein 87)

The idea of providing the audience with something that truly interests them is what Foreman and Stein espouse. This idea is taken further by the work of social critics such as Jean Baudrillard. For him, the phenomenon of “exciting the audience but not really thrilling them” is explained equally well using two opposite analogies. One, that the pace of information distribution and consumption has surpassed society’s ability to incorporate it into a reality. Of this analogy Baudrillard wrote, “one might suppose that the acceleration of modernity, of technology, events and media, of all exchanges - economic, political and sexual - has propelled us to ‘escape velocity’, with the result that we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real and of history” (*The Illusion of the End* 1). The other and opposite analogy is based on the over-saturation of information which makes any attempt to digest it pointless - like light unable to escape the gravity of a black hole.

This inert matter of the social is not produced by a lack of exchanges, information or communication, but by the multiplication and saturation of exchanges. It is the product of the hyperdensity of cities, commodities, messages and circuits. It is the cold star of the social and, around that mass, history is also cooling. Events follow one upon another, canceling each other out in a state of indifference. (Baudrillard 3)

Stein’s idea that we can no longer follow the “tradition to describe things that happen” (87) because “everybody all day long knows what is happening” (87) is supported by Baudrillard’s theory that we have either reached ‘escape velocity’ or have been pulled into





the ‘cold star of the social.’ It is to escape this fate of referential impotence that Foreman strives to accomplish with his third ‘distortion.’ By denying the audience the opportunity to discard or dismiss the information presented to them, he is working to awaken them out of the circular models presented by Baudrillard and Stein.

The following is from Richard Foreman’s *Ontological-Hysteric Theatre Manifesto II* July, 1974. Again, the format and emphasis are reproduced to accurately represent Foreman’s manifestos.

DON’T YOU WANT TO WAKE UP? TO HAVE A MIND THAT NOTICES  
THINGS? A MIND AS SHARP AS A MICRO-TELESCOPE?

I CAN HELP

BUT YOU HAVE TO *WANT* IT. WHEN YOU WANT IT--COME TO ME AND  
I’LL SHOW YOU SOMETHING YOU’LL BE ABLE TO MAKE USE OF.

UNTIL THEN

STAY HOME, IN BED, WHY SPOIL A GOOD NIGHT’S SLEEP. (*Plays And Manifestos* 143)

Also in this same manifesto he wrote: “ESTHETICS = ETHICS” (140) . In his second manifesto published six years after the production of *Angelface*, Foreman’s position of being able to awaken interest is much more assertive with his reader/audience. Whereas before he was interested in “keeping the mind alive,” now he is challenging the audience to not just wake up but to sharpen their mind. Foreman’s voice in this manifesto is much more confident, even to the point of being aggressive, and implies that he has an alternative - a **better** option - and the vision to awaken (save) the audience. In light of this and his



statement that “esthetics=ethics” it seems Foreman is fulfilling a self-assigned duty to reveal to his audience an alternative/better/purer “truth.” Foreman wrote that:

The aim of art, ultimately, is to speak to man’s spiritual condition, his relationship with the universe. I have always felt that I’m a closet religious writer - in spite of the aggressive, erotic, playful, and schizoid elements that decorate the surface of my plays - and it is because of my essentially religious concerns that some critics have attacked my plays for not accurately representing what they refer to as “real people” with “real” interpersonal, psychological, humanistic concerns. (*Unbalancing Acts* 5)

Again, this can be seen as a reference to ‘distortion 1’ from his first manifesto in reference to his rejection of Realism. Representing the appearance of ‘real’ or three dimensional characters with psychological goals implies a linear logic which the audience already knows and anticipates to see according to their social framework. For Foreman, the ‘truth’ lies beyond the psychology of characters/people in a larger realm. Further, in *Unbalancing Acts* Foreman wrote that:

...once you become truly interested in man’s so-called religious dimension, you lose interest in making an art that only recreates the superficial dynamics of the contingent level of being that is daily life. You lose interest in the level of “personality,” because you recognize it as a product of the conditioning of the social world. This conditioning interferes with our contact with the deeper ground of being by preoccupying us with the illusions of psychological, goal-oriented involvement. (5-6)

The idea that it is possible to possess the means to see a truer reality, to make “contact with the deeper ground of being”, and to find a spiritual connection - these are also indicative of





some of the rhetoric associated with prior modernist ideals. If Foreman is driven by an underlying truth, as his modernist predecessors were, Foreman differs in that he is pursuing his ideal by borrowing from these other disciplines and using a post-modern aesthetic to circumvent the “conditioning of the social world.”

In his third and last manifesto, *The Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto III*, which was revealed in June 1975, he adopted a much less aggressive stance and used examples to attempt to explain his position. The rhetoric he embraces seems not unlike the writing of Martin Heidegger whose philosophy Foreman has often acknowledged as an additional influence on him. The format of the quotation again imitates that in Foreman’s original manifesto.

Creativity (the effort at it) as the subject.

Creativity, which is a spark, always struck, always immediately  
consumed. Immediately struck again.

Creation, the minute *IS*, turns into a dead husk. The husk must then be replaced  
(annihilated, as it were) by the next succeeding immediate creative moment.

Isn’t that a RULE? I follow it.

Isn’t that a RULE that STANDS-UNDER?

That’s what I want.

To understand. (Foreman 193)

The idea that the act of creation, the moment it happens, immediately leaves its residue to be replaced/usurped by the next creative moment is central to these manifestos and to Foreman’s aesthetic. Replacing the previous act of creation with the next unique creative



moment is similar to Stein's method of continually starting again. The idea of seeing/isolating each successive moment as an entity itself without a *necessary* connection with what came before or will arise next is the 'saving-power' behind Foreman's work. To isolate (and even frustrate) the impulse of the moment, to work against the expectation of the expected "next" is what allows Foreman's work to invoke in the imagination of the audience not only the linear/logical next possibility but of every and any possibility open to the moment. The audience is forced to acknowledge every possibility rather than having the possibilities removed and their focus narrowed to a single path. Foreman states this idea in his third manifesto this way:

THE WORLD IS ROUND

THE ROAD IS NARROW.

Art should direct us to the world.

ART should REMIND us that one is not an

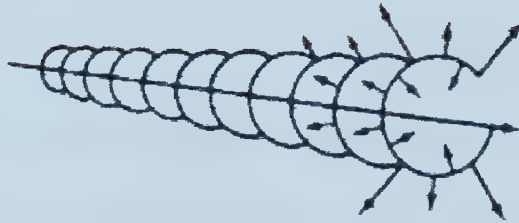


but a



or a





(*Plays and Manifestos* 147)

What is Richard Foreman's "spiritual" purpose in having people 'wake up'? What is a 'mind as sharp as a micro-telescope' able to perceive? A large number of Foreman's audience members have walked out on his productions finding his work nonsensical, unapproachable and frustrating. One of the few people who stayed during Foreman's early shows was Arthur Sainer, a critic for the *Village Voice* who reviewed Foreman's third play, *Total Recall*. Here Foreman quotes him in his *Unbalancing Acts*: "This is pretty hard to take, and while I am against most critics who give consumer guides, you must see this play because it's like nothing I've ever seen, and it's terribly important" (74-75).

Some of these 'important' aspects of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre can be found within its label. The name Ontological-Hysteric Theatre means: theatre of the essence (or nature) of physically existing in the moment,...every moment, one after the other. There are two separate concepts working in conjunction in this theatre: one is the ontological, the knowledge of reality and the other, the hysterical, which deals with the irrational and physical here and now, the ever *present*. By isolating and frustrating the impulse of each moment, moment after moment, this allows the audience to know the "reality" of their experience (ontological) prior to being able to easily assimilate the experience into the constructed framework given them by society (the hysterical present). This takes Stein's idea of continually beginning again in her writing and renders it physically by being *continually present again* on stage. Davy stated in 1981 that:





Ontology is 'the science of being or reality; the branch of knowledge that investigates the nature, essential properties, and relations of being.' In his theatre, Foreman takes the fundamental conflict (hysteric) basis of most traditional theatre and renders it phenomenologically - retarding and breaking up the hysterical situation or state, and focusing on the moment-to-moment reality of things-in-and-of-themselves. (7)

With the ontological and the hysterical working together, Foreman's theatre aims to awaken the audience to *know* "reality" in a non-rational, moment-to-moment, physically present way. This idea of physically knowing the reality of the moment applies to every aspect of the *experience* in the sense that the audience is not only aware of the actors, the props and the set but also physically aware of the space, the sound, the tangible/plastic nature of the *objects* present and the audience's own act of 'seeing.' For the audience to be aware of themselves as well as the play allows them a unique perspective which Foreman calls a "duo-consciousness" (*Plays And Manifestos* 143). He feels this heightened awareness is integral to knowing the reality of the moment. The audience should always be aware of the act of creation, of the decisions being presented to them, and in turn, should be made aware of their own involvement in the experience. Instead of being lulled into emotional identification and into letting the play happen before them, the audience is made aware of their own place within this relation with the play and even the process of experience itself. As Foreman states:

...I'm taking nineteenth-century naturalistic triangles and other psychological situations, which I believe are basically hysterical at their roots, in terms of classical psychiatry, the hysterical syndrome. And I'm trying to redeem them, and open up holes by which more - well, it sounds pretentious - more *cosmic* perceptual concerns



bleed through, that are really ontological concerns in the Heideggerian sense. (Davy 17)

The ‘cosmic’ perceptions revealed by these ‘opened’ holes are what Foreman alludes to as the ‘spiritual’ purpose behind his theatre. The situation and design of the play and the audience’s self-aware act of watching create the possibility for both the smallest and most personal associations as well as sweeping societal connotations to be made in the minds of audience members. It is this heightened perception that Foreman wants to create in focusing the minds of the audience ‘as sharp as a micro-telescope.’ Within this perception is found the underlying “truth” outside the enframing conventions of society. For Foreman, the essence of this heightened perception lies within the hysterical moment itself. Something is revealed when the moment is perceived - and continually re-perceived - solely as an existing presence. Foreman has this to say about Stein and her influence in revealing the essence of the moment:

There were two notions of Stein’s that particularly struck me. One: writing in a state of continual presence, a procedure which directly relates to what I’ve just described. And second, the notion of continually “beginning again” in the writing. ... In addition, in talking about writing in continual presence, Stein explained that she felt that she was writing the essence of the object, rather than its aura of cultural and emotional usage. And I, too, felt that with my minimalist orientation I was trying to get to the essence of the situation, and was avoiding the particular coloration the situation had been given by the culture. (*Unbalancing Acts* 79)

The coloration of the situation by culture is, in other words, the layers of meaning/associations/baggage placed on an object by society - ideology. Making the familiar





new, again and again, Foreman is stripping away the layers of ideology to the point where the audience is allowed to be aware of only the present physical moment [hysteric] and know it as such [ontology]. Perhaps this sheds some light on why so many audience members have walked out on Foreman's work. The fragmentation or 'frustration' experienced by many lies in the fact that every expectation (Foreman would like to think that every expectation has been dealt with) of mainstream theatre has been denied and the usual method of watching passively will not provide audiences with the escape they expect. The audience can't watch Foreman's work the same way as a realistic play or a play which follows an easily defined pattern. Audience members trying to do this fight the workings of the production and exhaust themselves in the attempt to make linear sense out of what they are witnessing. Much like pressing on a muscle during a massage to exhaust it and force it to relax, Foreman wants his audience to be forced out of the linear mode of sense-making. Possibly the audience members who have walked out of Foreman's shows did so because they were not interested or felt too uncomfortable leaving the safe moorings of familiar social conventions. Michael Heuvel's *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance* expands the idea of Foreman working against societal expectations this way:

Foreman, for instance, not so interested in the politics of performance or textuality, nevertheless concentrated the mise-en-scene of his Ontological-Hysteric Theater toward the breaking up and estranging of the cultural and subjective accretions that are normally bestowed on objects. The idea, with obvious influences from Brecht, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, was to bypass the ego- and culture-determined consciousness in order to estrange the spectator's natural anthropomorphic urge. (52)



Within the anthropomorphic urge lies the hysterical impulse. Ideology informs/enframes the culture-determined consciousness. These concepts are addressed by Foreman's method of distancing/alienation/*re-presenting* [*Verfremdungseffekt*] which allows his audience the opportunity to focus their minds 'as sharp as a micro-telescope.' It seems his method of circumventing the *macrocosm* of ideology lies in focusing on the infinitesimal details. Richard Foreman talks of techniques to 'fine-tune' and achieve an extreme focus on moments and objects but how does this focus work to bypass ego- and culture determined consciousness? What are the building blocks of the super-structure of ideology that Foreman is undermining? Kate Davy, in *Richard Foreman and the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre*, talks about how Foreman used the *Constructivist* model created by the Swiss psychologist and epistemologist Jean Paul Piaget:

Piaget adopted the *constructivist's* view of knowledge acquisition. The constructivist maintains that we do not respond directly to stimuli in our environment but to our perception, or construction, of the stimuli. If learning influences perception, and the evidence most certainly suggests that it does, then learning and cognition may make the world appear as it does - cognitive solutions go beyond sensory data. (191)

The layers of meaning, the baggage assigned to objects and the relationships between objects are the constructions, which, when placed together as a whole form our ideology - a way to see 'reality'. Foreman is showing his audience an alternative to the usual ('sleep' inducing) conventional views that mainstream culture continues to support. Ideologies work best when they maintain the façade of being the only way to 'see' reality. Foreman is showing an alternative way of 'seeing.' He, himself has said, "I like to think of my plays as an hour and



a half in which you see the world through a special pair of eyeglasses” (*Unbalancing Acts* 5). These ‘special eyeglasses’ allow the audience the opportunity to perceive beyond their enframed view of the world.

Martin Heidegger, in his essay “The Question Concerning Technology” (circa 1950) defines the term ‘enframing’ as the effect ideology has on perception and works well with the ideas of Piaget. “Enframing” is not simply a frame through which the world is viewed but an entire world-view created by an ideology that is continually *recreating* itself. Heidegger wrote that: “Enframing means the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve. Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological” (20). Even though Heidegger is concentrating on Technology as the enframing agent in his example of an ideology, his terminology and his discovery of a ‘saving-power’ out of the strangle-hold of an ideology are immensely useful when applied to Foreman’s Theatre because enframing supports the idea that it is possible to perceive (if only for a short time) outside an enframed view. Heidegger goes on to isolate the saving-power, the means to ‘save’ society from an enframed perspective:

In Greece, at the outset of the destining of the West, the arts soared to the supreme height of the revealing granted them. They brought the presence [*Gegenwart*] of the gods, brought the dialogue of divine and human destinings, to radiance. ... The arts were not derived from the artistic. Art works were not enjoyed aesthetically. Art was not a sector of cultural activity. ... Could it be that the fine arts are called to poetic





revealing? Could it be that revealing lays claim to the arts most primally, so that they for their part may expressly foster the growth of the saving power, may awaken and found anew our look into that which grants and our trust in it? (Heidegger 34-35)

Heidegger is describing how the fine arts can serve as ‘special eyeglasses’ through which society can see the world outside the vision enframed by technology. Heidegger’s vision of the fine arts, however, is following the model of the ancient Greeks, endowing them with the task of bettering the world (as opposed to pop art which Heidegger sees as profit-driven). This purpose of art to better the world has been applied to Foreman because of his aim to empower the imagination of his audience members. Often labeled a ‘closet religious writer,’ Foreman has said, “The aim of art, ultimately, is to speak to man’s spiritual condition, his relationship with the universe” (*Unbalancing Acts* 5). If ideology is seen (or not *seen* which is generally the case) as something immovable - as the *only* way to see ‘reality’ then it cannot be questioned. However, if Foreman’s theatre can show an alternative way to ‘see,’ then the dominant [sleep inducing] ideology becomes *questionable*. The purpose of pious/social art is not to provide the audience with tranquilizing entertainment but with empowering insight (or sight *outside* the framework) and opportunities for awareness and questioning. In this way, Foreman’s theatre holds a similar saving-power as Heidegger’s example of ancient Greek art. Heidegger maintains that “questioning is the piety of thought” (35).

Suzan Letzler Cole’s *Directors In Rehearsal* quotes Michael Feingold describing his reaction to Foreman’s intellectually thick theatre says, “his wonderful works remain as elusive, as dazzling and maddening, as ever.... No theater in New York, maybe even in the world, contains as much concentrated intellect as Foreman’s. Every theater artist puts on



stage a vision of his own mental or spiritual state, but Foreman is the only one I can think of who concentrates on doing that, purposively and exclusively, in an active, dramatic way” (126). The question arises as to how Foreman’s theatre accomplishes its goals while remaining ‘dazzling and maddening?’ How does the theory and its pious/social agenda translate to the stage?

Foreman offers this clue: “Character, empathy, narrative - these are all straitjackets imposed on the impulse so it can be dressed up in a fashion that is familiar, comforting, and reassuring for the spectator. ... The impulse is the vibrating, lively thing that you really are. And that is what I want to return to: the very thing you really are” (*Unbalancing Acts* 4). The Heideggerian saving-power of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre lies in the Steinian present-moment, the essence of which is the impulse. The following discussion will examine how Foreman’s writing, and his use of space, signs, and sound in his production of his work all contribute to this effect of isolating and frustrating the [hysterical] impulse.

Foreman’s process of writing, the basic material upon which his productions are based, epitomizes Gertrude Stein’s idea of continually beginning again. Even while putting words on the page, he avoids denying a conceptual flow by denying himself more than a few lines at a time. Foreman described his process of writing in the 1977 article “How I Write My (Self: Plays)” this way:

I try to write in such a way that the mark on the page is NOT a continuation, but a change of direction, always a change of direction, always something that was till now “left out”...only to find out in the end that it WAS a continuation after all. ... “Humm...I *MIGHT* write such-and-such...” And through that “I *MIGHT*” (which I



think of as somewhat akin to the Brechtian acting technique of “showing,” of commenting upon the gesture “as-if” it were really being made), through such an “I *MIGHT*” of writing, the rest of the world of the not-written is still somehow available, and the writing (and reading and seeing it staged) is a training in a certain psychic posture of keeping all alternatives and departures from THAT moment and THAT impulse available. To “MIGHT write” is to stay in the center of where writing arises. Where thinking arises. Where living arises. Only it’s not a center...it’s an everywhere. (*The Drama Review* 20)

Foreman works at disrupting any sort of flow from one line to the next - even though, as he states above, this disrupted collection of moments still creates a different form of continuation anyway. This different form of continuation follows a different logic: the impulse is sent in unexpected directions and is thus noticed. How he achieves a series of fresh beginnings is to clear his mind by reading, going for a walk, changing the parameters of the dialogue through changing the tense or the voice (ie. changing from the first-person to a self-referential third-person); or, as Foreman has stated, “I sleep, I negate the drift of the writing burst I’ve just fired” (21). With a mind free (at least momentarily), from the preceding line or unit, Foreman fires another ‘writing burst’ for a few lines and then works to clear his mind for the next. These ‘changes-of-subject’ are collected in notebooks that Foreman keeps in his home. When he is ready to create a play he selects twenty to thirty pages to become the material for the production. Foreman says this text-making process:

...continues over the days and weeks and does not stop and begin for each “play” but is a continual process from which “plays” are later extracted. At a certain point I pick





up one of my notebooks, look casually through it and decide “Hum...go from here to here and I have a play.” Which means that the text of any given work is a series of “change of subjects” - which I believe becomes the subject of the work itself as that continual change-of-subject, interruption, re-beginning, reflects the true shape and texture of conscious experience, which recognized and reflected in the work of art puts us in the very “place” where being-human becomes a free and creative way-of-being. (14)

Foreman’s *use* of language to reflect what he feels is “texture of conscious experience” is not a series of random words or phrases but a very specific manipulation of language to avoid both a purely random series of events and a linear/narrowing flow or logical connection. In his first manifesto in “Distortion 2 (Chance & Accident & the Arbitrary)” he rejects pure randomness as being unrewarding because it, too, becomes as predictable and ‘sleep inducing’ as linear logic because its elements are all equal in their randomness. Foreman skirts the line between logical continuity and arbitrary randomness through his rigorous process of denying a flow yet his works are unified by a singular vision. In essence, Foreman is using what many would consider very unnatural language to represent what he feels is a truer representation of “conscious experience” or perception of ‘reality.’ But Jean Paul Piaget’s observation that learning influences perception as well as Heidegger’s assertion that ideology *enframes* our perception of reality makes it possible to argue that language not only allows us to know reality [ontology] but to accept it as being reality - the “true shape and texture of conscious experience.” Jacques Derrida, in *Speech and Phenomena - And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, supports this notion that language does not follow reality but, in fact,



precedes it and informs our perception of it:

From the start we would have to suppose that representation (in every sense of the term) is neither essential to nor constitutive of communication, the “effective” practice of language, but is only an accident eventually occurring in the practice of discourse. But there is every reason to believe that representation and reality are not merely added together here and there in language, for the simple reason that it is impossible in principle to rigorously distinguish them. And it doesn’t help to say that this happens *in* language; language in general - and language alone - *is* this. (49-50)

Foreman’s writing, then, is a representation of what he feels is a truer reality than the contrived and distilled representation of situations and relationships seen on the commercially successful stage. This is largely because the type of theatre that is considered mainstream feeds the expectations of the audience as to what reality *should* be and reinforces the *enframed* ideology. Foreman seeks the fringe of communication where language no longer adequately *re*-presents (*pre*-presents) reality while the mainstream theatre creates the reality to fit the language used. Foreman’s theatre stands out because of its use of the abstract in its discourse with the audience as well as Foreman’s perspective on a “the true shape and texture of conscious experience” (Foreman, *The Drama Review* 14). Foreman describes the benefit of his writing over that of mainstream theatre this way:

So now, a day begins and I have pen in hand and I am doing all these things - doodling, lying about, thinking, sketching, jotting things down, not knowing I suppose exactly where I’m going but knowing which road should be taken because the only OTHER road that has ever been pointed out to me has led, 150 times in a row now,



to works of art which occasionally have their moments but which basically both bore me and (I would maintain) are subtly enslaving those who “make the effort” not to be bored by what they already know to be true. (*The Drama Review* 10)

As in his manipulation of the written language, Foreman’s use of the visual elements in his set design also support his aesthetic. Foreman is an accomplished set designer and has designed and built sets since he was in high school. During his early years in theatre he was heavily influenced by Brecht and experimented extensively with Brechtian techniques. Foreman has often acknowledged the influence of Brecht in his designs and his influence can be readily seen in Foreman’s productions for the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. This influence can be seen through Foreman’s use of slide projections, words written or hung in the playing space, lights shining at the audience, the machinations of the play being made visible to the audience - as well as his use of strings, boards or tubes to either skewer visual focus or over-emphasis a moment. With a similar intent to Brecht’s, who wanted the audience to always be aware of a separation between the actor and the character portrayed, Foreman wishes the audience to be constantly aware of their relationship with the stage space and the relationship of the objects within that space. He takes Brecht’s ideas further by using strict right angles in the set and the presence of strings to reinforce the spacial relationships - even to the point of mathematical precision (or dissection) - the audience is distanced from the play and reminded of their own perception and involvement in relation to the piece. In *Unbalancing Acts*, Foreman has this to say regarding using the strings to make the audience aware of their act of looking at the performance:

In many of my sets I have used strings, strung across the stage in various directions,





to cut up the space and to introduce lines that dissect the picture plane. Because something normal is rendered askew, it becomes extra noticeable. Normally, when an actor makes an entrance you watch his body cross the stage, and if it is a body you find interesting or desirable, you immediately entertain fantasies in which you live imaginatively in relation to that body in a real-life way. But with the string cutting across your field of vision, it is hoped you will notice, ever so slightly, your *act* of looking at that body because the act of looking has been interfered with by the string - which actually is quite beautiful in and of itself - so you will perhaps notice what it is like to see one part of the body appear above the line of string and another part appear below. (58-59)

The goal of aesthetic distancing is central to Foreman and the strings are only one method he uses to enable the audience to resist falling completely into the world of the play - an abstracted world filled with objects and signs suggesting a situation but not a literal time or place. He does not want to convince the audience that they have been transported to another place or time, but to create a laboratory feel with the audience as observers - removed from the action but essential to complete the process.

Foreman's design also consciously manipulates the 'fourth wall.' Although drawing our attention to the audience-stage divide by sometimes having a plexiglass sheet between them) he does not support the idea of creating a passive picture frame through which the audience can safely observe. At the same time Foreman is supporting a physical separation between the audience and the play he is also disrupting the fourth wall by having the actors often look directly at the audience in addition to having bright lights directed toward the



audience, buzzers, projections and his spoken text which is aimed at making the audience members conscious of their act of observation. This consciousness seems a goal associated more with Epic Theatre (Brecht) and the Theatre of Cruelty, both which are known to have worked to abolish the 'fourth wall.' By using a 'fourth wall' while also working to create aesthetic distance Foreman problematizes the barrier making it another conscious element/obstacle for the audience to be aware of. Here he describes his use of the 'fourth wall':

The sets are enclosed spaces, but in no sense should the audience feel it is peeking through an imaginary, transparent fourth wall. Instead, the action of the play should bounce against the three walls of the stage, then flirt with the trick surface of a fourth wall that the audience is continually, vaguely, reminded of. Often I introduce a railing, or some string, or even a wall of glass as an obstruction between the front row of the audience and the playing space. These barriers reinforce aesthetic distance.

*(Unbalancing Acts 58)*

Once past the 'fourth wall' the sets are cluttered (or empty) with whatever the script calls for and nothing else. There is no embellishment, only the minimum requirements according to the desired content of the moment. Foreman has said in the past that he started out in the strict minimalist style but became more interested in a symphony of events, finely controlled and orchestrated. The goal, always, is to annihilate the "dead husk" of the previous moment and replace it with the next moment/idea/decision; a continual beginning again, visually, either through shifting perspective, adding or removing layers or the introduction/removal of an other idea. Davy observes that, "Foreman has stated that his use



of space can be described as ‘cubistic’ insofar as the conscious rationale behind his manipulation of space, performers, and objects is to ‘tilt things’ or display a variety of angles and perspectives, not ordinarily perceivable from the vantage point of the audience, both sequentially and simultaneously” (41). While Foreman’s goal is to present to the audience a series and symphony of events, he assumes the audience will “scan” the entire visual field at all times, and wishes to invoke in the audience’s imaginations the infinite potential of each moment (an outward awareness rather than a linear, reductive focus). The device he employs to have audience members aware of the instant is to expose them to a narrow field of vision - to control their perception to achieve the greatest effect from the right angles and precision provided by the strings and placement of the actors and objects. Davy comments:

He is not trying to achieve a disparity of effect for different spectators sitting in different places. Instead, he controls the visual field by placing audience members close together so that he can carefully determine the various perspectives to be presented. The audience is positioned so that all spectators see essentially the same visual field at approximately, or relatively, the same angle. (Davy 50)

Thus Foreman’s visual composition and use of visual barriers creates an aesthetic distance in his audience while, at the same time, allowing for the abstraction, layering and manipulation of the audience’s (single) perspective that Davy labeled as “cubistic”.

An essential component of Foreman’s visual composition is his use of signs. He layers and manipulates the content of the play, moment by moment, through a direct engagement with the audience by presenting them with questions or statements that introduce other possible layers of interpretation onto the scenes. Speaking of Foreman’s use of slide





projections, Davy comments:

Foreman explains that the slides also function as ‘a kind of running commentary on the play, as it is proceeding, to raise questions that I think might be interesting at various points in the action; to throw into doubt certain things that the spectator might be taking for granted; to introduce another angle of thought. There are many perspectives on any event, and I want as many of those perspectives as possible to be present to the spectator in all moments.’ In *Sophia*, a grandfather clock appears in the window of the rear wall upstage left and the slide reads:

‘Can’t you see me.

Even if you can’t

see what time it is.

See me anyway.’ (147)

There is an essential difference between Brecht’s use of projections and Foreman’s. Brecht wished to clarify or define the situation or conflict to make his socio-political point clearer. For Foreman, the messages on the projections tend not to define, but to challenge the audience in some way: to introduce an existential question or to undermine their assumptions. Brecht presented or challenged a definite position through the issues he represented onstage and used means like projections to ensure that the aspects (the ‘side’) of the situation Brecht wanted to emphasize was clear to the audience. He used the language and symbology already present in the crisis to state his point in support of his Marxist political agenda. He wanted the audience to understand a particular position on the issue presented. Foreman is less politically and historically bound for, while using projections, Foreman is not



emphasizing any overt position but is undermining the situation in general. Foreman is using language and symbology not to define the meaning of the situation but to question how the audience is constructing meaning from the situation. Though not representing a specific and identifiable political agenda like Brecht, Foreman challenges the audience to question their assumptions of how they see objects and events and in turn apply labels and meaning to them. This theatrical device, itself, performs a political act in that it questions the audience's assumptions and refers back to Foreman's second manifesto and his desire to "wake up" the minds of his audience members. It is political because it makes the individuals who make up the audience question their own societal programming concerning the use of the actor's bodies (sexuality and gender) and of objects (materialism) in addition to their own perception of reality. In "Richard Foreman's Scenography: Examples From His Work In France," published in 1984, Guy Scarpetta described how Foreman takes Brecht's ideas further:

For Brecht, it was necessary to provide a sort of critical counterpoint to the representation. Foreman retained this process, but changed the direction of its function. ... Foreman's method is not didactic. These signs signify nothing but their abstract function. By discreet contamination, they designate as signs all the other elements in the set. ... More than being Brechtian, Foreman is closer to the utilization of signs - letters or ciphers - by Cy Twombly, for example, in which a likeness with Foreman's literalization may be found. The presence of these signs is not aimed at the spectator's comprehension, but at their *perception*. It suggests that the "delerium" it assists also possesses secret logic, cipherization, writing. (*The Drama Review*, 29)

This "secret logic" mentioned above is Foreman's agenda to free the minds of this audience



and awaken in them creativity and awareness. He wants his art to change the perceptions of his audience. Brecht and Foreman both want to change the perceptions of his individual audience. However, the difference between the two artists lies in the fact that Brecht overtly worked to challenge, undermine or reinforce specific view-points in pursuit of his political goals while Foreman is working to question the construction of perception itself.

The use of sound is also integral to Foreman's productions and supports his aesthetic in its own way. Foreman uses tape-loops to create the sound-scapes for his Ontological-Hysteric Theatre pieces. A tape loop is created by recording a sound (usually on a reel-to-reel tape recorder) and splicing the tape together in such a way that a short finite loop is created. Usually there are several tape loops used at the same time and the volumes are controlled through a sound mixer. The effect is that the sound captured on the loop will play continuously over and over. A form of music can be created that is non-linear in the sense that it is not driven by the idea of melody and harmony (a linear progression of chords to a resolution), but instead it becomes a music determined by changing rhythms and sound textures. This technique has been used widely, one of the most famous examples of this is *Revolution No. 9* by The Beatles. Now in the age of digital technology a similar effect is created through the use of samples which capture/record the sound digitally and loop it (forward, backward, etc.) within a computer.

*Unbalancing Acts* describes some of the influences on how Foreman created his sound-design and why the use of tape loops interested him:

These tape techniques were inspired by the sound manipulations of musicians like LaMonte Young, Phil Glass, and Steve Reich, whom I'd heard in concert at Jonas





Meka's Filmmaker's Cinematheque. LaMonte's pieces, for instance, were loud, continuous tones - drones with no real variation for minutes at a time - which made you listen to sound itself in a deep, different way. I wanted to get that same thickness, that overlay of sound, in the spoken language of my play. I was also influenced by the early events staged by Jack Smith and the particular acting style he encouraged in his performers, which was based upon having very little happen, stretched over long, long periods of time. That influenced both the rhythmic articulation of the speech on my tapes and the way I asked the actors to repeat the dialogue onstage, very slowly, with an uninflected delivery, in counterpoint to the tapes during the performance. (33-34)

Foreman's use of tape loops facilitates his aesthetic practice of forcing the audience away from a narrowing, linear focus and into an outward awareness because there is no traditional musical progression as the sounds recorded repeat without end. The outcome of listening to sound or music in a "deep, different way" by forcing the audience away from a tonal centre and harmonic progression can also be achieved through repetition exemplified by the music of Philip Glass or by stasis as demonstrated by La Monte Young. All three of these methods of sound manipulation thwart the audience's expectation of a linear progression.

Unlike Foreman's writing process where the beginning again is "a careful insertion between logic and accident," he tends to allow accident to prevail in the choosing of the material to use as a source for the tape loops and music. Foreman says, "The only time I really appreciate Cagian principles of chance is in getting music for the shows...it always works" (Davy 164). The original source of the sound may be random, but then, as the



material in Foreman's notebooks is similarly edited and shaped into a play, the sound is manipulated to fit (or disrupt) the play according to Foreman's unifying vision.

In addition to his use of tape loops, Foreman also makes use of loud buzzers and alarms to awaken/alert the audience out of settling into a moment or to jolt them away from an expected response. Sometimes, the actor's dialogue is put on tape to break up the dialogue between the tape and the live actors. This effect distances the audience by making them especially aware of the manipulation of sound, as well as the content of the scene and of the words themselves.

With all these elements it is no surprise that Foreman has been described as one of the last truly polyphonic artists. The events are orchestrated to happen in symphony and quite often simultaneously as opposed to having the lines or events happening one after another in a logical order. The actors and objects are directed/arranged on stage to reinforce or break right angles which are again reinforced with string or other barriers/obstacles. These visual barriers/obstacles are placed to help create aesthetic distance in the audience as the sound-scape, signs/projections, bright lights, loud buzzers and, of course, the content of the play also does. However, Foreman's intent is not to overwhelm the audience (and thus miss the detail and focus) but to heighten their awareness. Therefore he slows the pace of his productions to the point where the audience can perceive each moment and decision onstage. Davy observes that the pace is slowed because:

if the action were rapidly paced, the spectator might not pay any attention to this, and similar details. But because the action of events on the stage is slowed down significantly, perception is retarded, and a contemplative mode of attention may be



initiated. In other words, if the spectator is not overcome by ennui, an intentional form of attention will ensue, in which the spectator ponders that which is being presented to his senses, noticing the mismatching as it is occurring. (194)

Just as Foreman described the music of LaMonte Young (referring to it as a drone sustained over a long period of time) as forcing the listener into a different mode of hearing sound, so too, the pacing of Foreman's theatre forces the audience to experience the performance in a different mode of perception. The expectation, or impulse, in the imagination of the audience member for an action to be the cause of a *re*-action is frustrated not just through the content and orchestration of the stage picture (which could be accepted simply as surreal or nonsensical), but by a slowed pace which makes everything deliberate and open to scrutiny. Foreman words this idea of heightening the perception of the moment this way:

I like to think of my plays as an hour and a half in which you see the world through a special pair of eyeglasses. These glasses may not block out all narrative coherence, but they magnify so many other aspects of experience that you simply lose interest in trying to hold on to narrative coherence, and instead, allow yourself to become absorbed in the moment-by-moment representation of psychic freedom.  
(*Unbalancing Acts* 5)

While the magnification of the moment, and the moment-by-moment beginning again are paramount to the aesthetic of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, it should be emphasized that many events are happening simultaneously and that the audience, while sharing relatively the same perspective of the stage space, are expected to scan the entire picture rather than focus in on any one area. Foreman wants the audience's attention spread throughout the stage





space instead of staying locked onto an actor or an object for more than a moment.

Foreman's *Unbalancing Acts*, reinforces this idea of taking in the whole stage picture:

I like to assume that the spectator is watching the entire stage at all moments of the play, so I try to make a stage picture in which every inch of the stage dynamically participates in the moment-by-moment composition of the piece. ... The eye should be held in suspension between all points of the stage picture, just as twelve-tone music does not focus your attention on a tonal center but spreads it equally within the field of the twelve tones. (55)

Comparing Richard Foreman's theatre with music that forces its listeners away from a tonal centre is useful as a metaphor to understand how it is possible to force audience members out of the 'normal' mode of experiencing music and theatre. Forcing the audience members away from their comfortable centre of understanding and distancing them from the piece itself allows them to experience the creative freedom of each moment. This is the creative freedom that has caused some of Foreman's audience members to label Foreman's theatre as a spiritual experience and can be seen as the saving-power of art against our *enframed* perceptions of society/reality. Heuvel describes Foreman's method of achieving aesthetic distance this way:

Foreman's theater ostends and then ironizes traditional modes of spectatorship by awakening people's ability to confront things - words, objects, relationships - on a level of final, physical significance, as diction rather than syntax. His methods of alienating viewers from any sympathetic identification with what takes place on stage include the use of loud buzzers, spotlights focused directly at the spectators, randomly



selected words or phrases dangled from the flies, and scripts that reveal neither causality nor characters whom the viewer can invest with Presence. (50)

By exposing/revealing the potential impulse(s) contained within each moment, audience members are awakened to their own hysteric existence and, at least for the moment, enjoy a 'duo-consciousness' that circumvents (frees) them from the reassuring linear socially constructed method of seeing and understanding 'reality'. Taking the audience away from their comfortable moorings of understanding can be an experience that is what Stein would call, "interesting" (87), which may explain why Foreman has had such a love/hate reaction to his work. But then, Foreman has said, "I'm doing it for myself. And then offering it to anybody else that might be encouraged by it, a little bit" (Davy 183). Foreman is more concerned with his idea that esthetics=ethics than with pleasing the audience (lulling them back to sleep). *Unbalancing Acts* states what he expects of the theatre and the theatre artist:

The task of the artist is to be open to all the ambiguities, all the multiple impulses present in a given situation. ... I want a theatre that can treat all of this, not through suggestion, but through the play of the concrete sign-systems of the theater (bodies, props, light, sound, word), so such conflicting possibilities are made to dance, both in word and action. (51)

This introduction to Foreman's three manifestos and a description of his writing, directing and design work with the early Ontological-Hysteric Theatre should provide some context with which to investigate Richard Foreman's work thirty years later. The next chapter shows how the style of his theatre is changing and growing, especially in the current conservative economic climate for the arts and arts-funding.



# Chapter 2

## Foreman's Work From the Mid-1990's to Now

Expanding out from the previous chapter on the origins of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, this chapter deals with Foreman's recent work from the mid-1990's until now. Now that Foreman's theatre is over thirty years old, different issues have emerged. My first topic draws on recent performances to determine whether Foreman has deviated from his original aesthetic as outlined by the three manifestos. Some critics feel there has been a shift in the nature of crisis in the content of Foreman's plays from 1994 onward even though Foreman, himself, does not agree. The three plays from this period I will concentrate on are: *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* (1994), *Pearls for Pigs* (1997), and *Paradise Hotel* (1999). The other two developments I want to examine are: the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre School and the ForemanFest. Foreman's theatre now has a school which accepts and trains interns in his aesthetic. Over the past three years the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre School has put on a ForemanFest which features a festival of Foreman's work directed by student directors. More recently the theatre has explored the benefits of touring to increase the theatre's exposure and revenue, to create more of an audience and counter the fact that arts funding is drying up in the United States.

Foreman's works have always been created from whatever impulses arose from his reading, viewing and imagination and in that way have always been an insight into the





workings of his mind. However, the last few productions (from 1994 onward), have led critics like Shawn-Marie Garret to observe that his plays have become more centered on an individual protagonist dealing with physically present antagonists rather than on having all the characters in the play equal participants in the crisis. The recent shift in the focus of Foreman's plays, according to Garrett's "Dummied Down: *Pearls for Pigs* at the Hartford Stage", lies in the fact that, "Foreman has at least partly abandoned exploring his unconscious impulses in favor of staging his quite conscious frustration and boredom with the theatre and his position in it. Thus the problems of Foreman's own specific subject position, rather than those of subjecthood in the abstract, have increasingly come to dominate his theater" (*Theater* 15). This shift from the unconscious to the conscious would indicate Foreman's recent writing is bringing a simpler or more traditional conflict to the stage at the cost of evoking the abstract crises of existentialism and metaphysics that his earlier works are known for. Garrett goes on to say that lately: "his central characters (including 'Maestro' from *Pearls for Pigs* and the 'Professor' from *My Head Was A Sledgehammer*) have been hemmed in not only by semiotic pointers but by well-meaning tormentors, frustrated by stupid questions more often than by 'externalized double binds,' abused by the material world no less than by pesky protégés" (*Theater* 15-16).

During a recent telephone interview with Foreman, I asked him about his reaction to the recent articles and their observation that the crisis of his plays has shifted to a central character. He said he didn't agree and gave the example of the character of Rhoda, from his early play *Rhoda In Potato Land*, as a similar "central" character but did not elaborate on any change in the nature of crisis itself. However, recent reviews see a shift in how much



importance is given the “central character” and how he/she is used/abused on stage. Instead of tackling abstract philosophical ideas as the core of his ‘situations,’ the last few productions have been ‘grounded’ in the struggle of a central character and the crisis has been explored/discovered/inflicted on them. An example of this shift is given by Robert Gross in his performance review of *Pearls for Pigs* published in *Theatre Journal* in 1998:

Although Richard Foreman’s theatre has always been one of crisis, the nature of the crisis has shifted noticeably in his two most recent plays. In *Permanent Brain Damage* [1995], Foreman’s offstage voice described a man in crisis, a man who had lost the capacity for pleasure, while onstage, a man only identified as “In a White Suit” was menaced, spanked, immobilized, and zipped into a body bag. Hope for this poor fellow was mocked as Foreman sang a strident and grotesquely distorted version of “On the Sunny Side of the Street.” Promoted as the most “emotionally naked and personal” of all Foreman’s plays, the combined effect of the publicity and the use of the artist’s voice encouraged spectators to interpret the play, not as an exploration of the workings of consciousness, like so many of Foreman’s earlier works, but as a blunt expression of the artist’s emotional state. (517)

Foreman’s theatre is designed to allow the audience to witness the choices being made just as much (if not more) than the ‘action’ taking place. In the past, audiences and critics have said seeing a Foreman show is like going to see Richard Foreman’s mind working on stage whereas now it is becoming more about Foreman’s state of mind. His shows from 1994 onward seem to be about the frustration and struggle of an individual character, and since his plays are composed of the material from Foreman’s own imagination and experience, it seems



safe to conclude that he is exposing his frustration with the theatre and his place in it onstage. It is no wonder then, that shows like *Permanent Brain Damage* described above and *Pearls for Pigs*, where the central character is a theatrical artist who is frustrated with the theatre, have been seen as not only self-referential but, to a certain extent, autobiographical. Gross' performance review states that *Pearls for Pigs*:

is about a theatrical artist, the Maestro (played by David Patrick Kelly), who articulates a vision of theatre that often sounds very much like the one Foreman articulates in his interviews and manifestos. When, for example, the Maestro asserts, 'I am not the main character. The world itself, is the main character', he gives voice to Foreman's own phenomenological aesthetics. (*Theatre Journal* 517)

If the Maestro from *Pearls for Pigs* may be seen as a metaphor for Foreman himself - as reviewers like Robert Gross seem to accept readily - then Foreman's frustration with theatre and with the act of writing can not be denied. The Maestro, despite stating lines like, "I am not the main character. The world itself, is the main character," is very much the main character in the 'situation' of the play and parallels Foreman's own experience wherein Foreman himself is the center piece of his works even while he struggles to make the audience aware of the performance before them and self-aware of their act of witnessing it.

Foreman has made known that he has accomplished much of what he has set out to do in his own experimental theatre and is struggling with the act of writing. His work is very closely tied with what he is reading/watching/feeling, more so than usual because it informs Foreman's single auteur vision that creates the play from the first words on the page right through to the design and direction of it. Because of this, his own frustration with the theatre





is made manifest onstage. He feels he has attained his goals and is somehow trapped by his own creation. “This idea of the imagination under siege, dying if the imaginer realizes his visions, is central to Foreman’s recent work” (Robinson 6). Foreman’s plight is metaphorically represented by his recent protagonists who are trying to take the focus and scrutiny off themselves and place it elsewhere. For Foreman, he wishes to take the focus off himself as the creator and place it onto the creation. The dilemma for these protagonists is they are trapped in a mechanism that is designed to expose the choices of creation. The Maestro from *Pearls for Pigs* is a good example of a character trapped in this double-bind as supported by Robert Gross in his performance review of the same play:

...a single character dominated the dramatic action to a degree virtually unprecedented in Foreman’s work. The Maestro’s lengthy speeches were less frequently interrupted by aggressive bells, buzzers, flashing lights, and outbreaks of manic action than usual. His actions were less often undermined by the actions of others. He turned to the audience and directly addressed it, even establishing eye contact with individual spectators. (*Theatre Journal* 518)

Gross feels that by using less techniques of disruption, Foreman allowed the character of The Maestro to develop in a more traditional sense and to evoke from the audience a feeling of empathy - all this while the Maestro claims not to be the main character. Gross continues by saying, “the obsessive energy of a Foreman actor was turned toward the audience, which was actively wooed. For once, Foreman’s techniques of writing and staging strengthened the lead performer and contradicted the Maestro’s claim. Despite his protestations, he was the main character, and was situated in a uniquely privileged relationship to the audience” (*Theatre*



*Journal* 518).

It seems that Richard Foreman is re-introducing in the production of *Pearls for Pigs* (1997) some of those techniques that he previously shunned. Having the audience actively wooed by a Foreman actor contradicts his early manifestos and his claim that he hates seeing actors asking the audience to love them. In his earlier works the aggressive distraction techniques, the more abstract subjects/situations, and a more equal treatment of the characters in the dilemma they faced alienated the audience from feeling empathy or sympathy for any one character over the others. Now, however, in the character of the Maestro, Foreman has created a more central character to identify with and allowed him a more uninterrupted chance to speak and connect with the audience.

I have synthesized two explanations from the writing of Foreman's critics to justify this recent shift in focus. The first is that the use of a central character, and one allowed to speak with less interruptions and directly to the audience is a more effective tool to convey the message of Foreman's view on the world, on art and on reality. The idea, and it may be a sign of Foreman's frustration, is that he is taking his goal of having the audience question their assumptions by directly questioning/confronting the audience. This direct approach has made critics like Garrett wonder if Foreman is simplifying his work. The second opinion is that, opposed to previous plays where the characters were used to express Foreman's decisions and ideas onstage, he is placing an identifiable protagonist between his constructions and the audience as a means of taking the audience's attention away from himself as the creator. Instead of presenting characters and situations that expose the workings of his mind, Foreman is placing the characters, and especially the central character, between the audience



and himself - to distance himself from the audience. Marc Robinson, in his "Richard Foreman Loses His Head" describes Foreman as "fleeing his legacy" this way:

Once upon a time, audiences went to a Richard Foreman play to see a vision of Richard Foreman - his mind dispersed among his characters and set free onstage, where spectators could follow its wanderings. Now, Foreman's audiences see him fleeing his legacy. He wants them to watch anything, and anyone, except himself, just as he wants to write about anything except himself - and would do so, if he could figure out a way for writing to avoid the writer's signature. (*Theater* 12)

The notion that Foreman wants to take the audience's attention away from himself - away from the creator and onto the creation - is supported further by the fact that in recent years, though still present backstage at his productions, he chooses not to be visible to the audience as he used to be while running the sound or otherwise controlling/observing the performance. The question of why Foreman chooses to hide from his audience's view in recent years was raised during a panel discussion "Beyond Sense and Nonsense: Perspectives on the Ontological at 30" on April 17, 1997 which involved Charles Bernstein, Arthur Danto, Sylvère Lotringer, and Annette Michelson. Foreman replied:

I hate to disappoint you, but the reason I disappear is that I can't abide seeing anybody look at their program, look away, look at their watch. It's agony. I remember Michael Kirby - who recently died, who taught at NYU, was the editor of the *Drama Review* for many years and was an early supporter of my work. He'd made some plays of his own, and he said: "You know Richard, we're trying to be avant-garde artists, we want to make these things that nobody's ever seen before, that





are very difficult, that people won't know how to respond to, but at the end of the play if everybody doesn't stand up and shout 'Bravo!' we're crushed. We're terribly disappointed." And that contradiction of course informs all of us. But that's why I hide out. (*Theater* 31)

The contradiction that Foreman mentioned between providing the audience with challenging work they have never seen before and wanting the audience to "stand up and shout 'Bravo!'" may help understand why Foreman can be perceived as wooing the audience even while he is hiding from their gaze. I think, after a long and what some would consider to be a successful career, that it would not be unreasonable for Foreman to want his work to be more accessible to a larger or more diverse audience. As Foreman's awards pile up and his work slowly becomes more accepted the pressure to make the work accessible to a wider audience, especially in the current funding climate, is very real. Also, by making the creation the centre of the audience's attention instead of watching the creator's mind at work onstage, it takes the onus off Foreman himself to be always more and more challenging as the source of creativity. Foreman will be 63 in 2001 and is interested in having other directors produce his work to ensure the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre can continue without him. Foreman can be seen as not just distancing himself from his audience but is having his protagonists take his place as the centre of attention. Central characters like The Maestro, The Professor, the man "in a white suit" become Foreman's simulacra.

The following excerpt is taken from the programme notes for *Pearls for Pigs* and while that production has been labeled as the most autobiographical of Foreman's plays and criticized for actively 'wooing' the audience, he still feels the ultimate priority of the



Ontological-Hysteric Theatre is still to frustrate/expose/free the ‘impulse.’ This is how Foreman describes the situation in *Pearls for Pigs*:

It’s true, there is no “story” in the normal sense. But there is definitely a SITUATION. The situation in *Pearls for Pigs* is that the leading character, the Maestro, after a long career, realizes he hates the theatre. And what he hates it for is the way in which it suppresses the possibility that impulse - human impulse - might be allowed to disrupt the performance. (*The Drama Review* 157)

Even though thirty years of production has passed since Foreman wrote the first of his three manifestos the goal to isolate the impulse through a theatre of situation is still strong. Despite the fact that more attention is given to the wants and needs of the Maestro, the ‘central character,’ and the character is given the opportunity to directly speak to the audience, Foreman still practices a non-linear theatre that forces the audience to be aware of and to question their perception of reality. As he states in the programme notes for *Pearls for Pigs*, he is not interested in delivering meaning but wants to question the audience’s assumptions of what makes meaning:

There is no story in my plays, because IMPULSE is set free to deflect normal linear development. Linear, narrative development in the theatre always ends with a denouement, which delivers a “meaning”- i.e., moral. Perform in such-and-such a way, and such-and-such are the results. This kind of narrative, this kind of logically arrived at “moral” conclusion, is in fact a way of reinforcing the spectators’ behavioral conditioning - conditioning provided by the world which exists “as we have been conditioned to perceive it” by physical reality, society, inherited psychological



patterns, etc. Such a world disciplines, orders, and imprisons a wide and potentially fruitful range of human impulses towards diversity and invention. My theatre is a theatre of SITUATION and IMPULSE. (*The Drama Review* 157)

In 1974 Foreman wanted to “awaken the minds of the audience.” In 1998 he wishes to set free the audience’s “potentially fruitful range of human impulses towards diversity and invention.” The difference now, it seems, is that Foreman is experimenting with allowing the audience an empathetic “in” to the play through the experience of the ‘central character.’ More empathy, at least, than in earlier works. In addition, this has allowed Foreman more moments of tenderness or sensuality in his plays whereas in the past they have been seen as more strictly sexual in his treatment of bodies as objects. Foreman’s experimentation with allowing the audience to feel empathy for the main character has also allowed for more subtlety in his treatment of the characters and the situation however the danger lies in the fact that emotional identification can inhibit the audience’s conscious perception.

During an interview with Markus Wessendorf entitled, “Richard Foreman’s *Hotel Fuck: Theatre at the Turn of the Century*” concerning Richard Foreman’s 1999 show, Foreman was asked about the sensual quality of his plays. Though, at times his recent work has been seen as more sensitive (or subtle) in its composition of objects and bodies, Foreman’s aesthetic goal is still to remove all the unnecessary clutter from the object, impulse and moment - to reveal only the present free of social conditioning and a moral. Foreman replied by saying, “in all of my plays, when we start out, there are many scenes that are more seductive or more romantic, more mysterious in all those classically theatrical ways that so many art audiences seem to love” (*Theater Der Welt/Theater Der Zeit* 138). Foreman then





goes through the process of eliminating all the unnecessary clutter to allow a sharp focus on each moment/impulse. However, as Foreman is experimenting with allowing his protagonists to create a more direct connection with the audience, so too, Foreman is experimenting with letting some sensual aspects remain in his plays. Over-all, however, Foreman remains dedicated to “destroying the dead husk of the previous moment to be replaced by the next moment following” and in doing so ruthlessly eliminates the seductive and romantic scenes that interfere with emphasizing the ever-present objects and bodies. He describes his elimination process during rehearsals this way:

...as we go through it day after day, it starts to seem like such junk to me, and it seems just not bold and aesthetically confrontational enough, and I end up throwing out all those beautiful things - all those romantic things - and just wanting instead the feeling that the materials on stage are palpable, concrete things to be held right under the audience's nose - UNAVOIDABLY PRESENT! No disguises. No “art” (though, of course, I'm an unreconstructed aesthete!). (Wessendorf 138)

Foreman's reaction against beautiful/romantic art is the same as his reaction against politically or socially embedded theatre, performance art, agit-prop because they promote their own morals and meanings which the audience is expected to “get”. Brecht's theatre and the theatre known as ‘social-action’ can be set apart from Foreman's because they present a position on an issue and work to clarify the message the audience is supposed to “get,” at least at the simplest level of the dialectic. Realism and melodrama are examples of styles of theatre that create beautiful and romantic moments and these forms also work to convey a message for the audience. The difference with the latter is that they are insidiously political



in that the message conveyed to the audience is embedded in a hidden ideology (usually heterosexual, capitalist, patriarchal, racist) reinforced by its own constructed truth, not allowing the audience to question its position. Foreman states his own stance on clarifying a message in “Today I Am A Fountain Pen: An Interview with Richard Foreman”:

As I get older I strongly adhere to an almost anti-Brechtian stance in the sense that I don't want to clarify anything. I don't want to give any ideas. What I want continually to express and evoke in people is the hunger for meaning, the wish that drives us that things could make sense and there could be a final meaning - which of course, I don't believe in. (*Theater* 82)

If anything, Foreman's work is political in the sense that it aims at removing the conditioning of society and leaving the audience to follow (in their imagination) their own impulsive possibilities for each moment without rules or a singular moral view point. Perhaps Foreman is an advocate of intellectual anarchy since he wishes to empower the individual to make their own sense (decisions, judgements: ideology) of the world and their understanding of reality. In the interview with Wessendorf entitled, “Richard Foreman's *Hotel Fuck*: Theatre at the Turn of the Century”, he speaks about the importance of individual visions of life:

I have no interest in thinking about trends, thinking about the sociological significance or the political significance, because I don't think that's how life really operates. Especially in these corporate end-of-the-century times the only thing that is important is individual idiosyncratic visions of life as possibly different - not a different world, because a different world means constructing a new world out of the same old materials. (143)



The aim, according to Foreman is not to create a new world from the destruction of the old, but to boil down the old material into a new life, and indeed, to fulfill a postmodern aesthetic by finding a new use for old ideas. In the following statement by Richard Foreman, he comments on Bertolt Brecht and Gertrude Stein, who were both modernists working to attain an ideal to change the world. Foreman realizes that the material he uses, the context in which he writes and produces, or indeed, the frustration and boredom he feels, are all part of the process - not to be denied/blocked/censored but encouraged as another useful ingredient.

My two teachers in the theater, neither of whom I'm that crazy about today, were Brecht and Gertrude Stein. Gertrude Stein said at various times that writing should not show the stress of writing it. And now I realize I've always tried to do the opposite: to show the stress and the problematic of writing it and staging it, and everything else. (Bernstein, Danto, et. al 27)

The idea of denying nothing involved in the process of creation is paramount and, for Foreman, more true to life. This reference to truth, or even of presenting a 'truer vision of life' for an audience, as Foreman's three manifestos and early writing often referred to, is no less idealistic than the theories of Brecht or Stein. There is an inherent conflict between Foreman's pursuit of "truth" even while his theatre works to empower the perspective and imagination of the individual. The use of the word "truth" implies that Foreman believes there is some unifying essence that his theatre is allowing the audience to tap into. I feel that the unifying essence Foreman is working to isolate is the pure present moment and by successfully showing that, the audience is exposed to 'a truer vision of life.' In fact, this idea of an elusive underlying truth appears to be the "ontological root" of Foreman's work as he





defines it. Foreman describes the “ontological root” of his theatre in “Beyond Sense and Nonsense: Perspectives on the Ontological at 30” this way:

What happens, I think, is that by reframing my “errors” - they become unavoidable and beautiful necessities. The very source of creativity. Echoing the way in which real-life human beings are ALWAYS stumbling, goofing, making the wrong choice - but then life has a way of utilizing error and everything that is “BAD” as the fulcrum out of which struggles invention and discovery and consciousness itself. The poetry and the human fuel of goof after goof - I think that’s the way life does its work - and that’s what I try to echo in my plays. That’s the “ontological root” as well as the hysterical atmosphere. (Bernstein, Danto, et. al 34)

Foreman’s ‘truer vision of life’, the ontological root of his work, is created by presenting a series of independent moments and by using every impulse including the mistakes involved in the process as the basis. In that lies the saving-power of Foreman’s work: to awaken the minds of the audience, or at least not lull them into an ever deeper sleep. If learning comes from dealing with the mistakes in life then Foreman’s gift to the audience is to allow them to experience and be made aware of the validity of mistakes in the act of creation.

This ideal of making the audience aware of the ever-present is as strong as ever but now thirty years later Foreman is dealing with frustration and boredom with theatre and writing. This may help understand why Foreman finds the need to explore new methods and combinations to keep his theatre fresh for himself. This is the legacy some feel Foreman wishes to flee. Marc Robinson’s “Richard Foreman Loses His Head” states that, “Foreman confesses that he can only partly restore the promise of theater with his signature stage frenzy,



his ‘unbalancing acts’” (*Theater* 11). But the answer doesn’t lie in the consumerist mantra of “more and faster” but in the unknown choice - the *might be* that could happen next. The unrealized event is always the more exciting possible next moment for as soon as the event happens, as outlined in Foreman’s manifestos from the early ’70s, it becomes a dead weight that must be cleared away to make room for the next. It is for this reason that, “Foreman doubts that even the busiest production would satisfy his needs. The unstaged, unimagined play would still seem more vital. He would be pleased, and his artistic ambitions would be fulfilled, only if he could copy the theater envisioned by the Pierrot in *Pearls for Pigs*: ‘The curtain rises on nothing’” (Robinson 11).

The “curtain” has yet to “rise” on nothing. He has yet to use an empty stage even though it does hold the potential for the unexpected next moment. For now, Foreman is just as much focused on making the objects he uses subjects for scrutiny and manipulation of both themselves onstage as used by the actors and indirectly, the audience. His sets don’t literally define a time or place but give the audience some basis with which to enter the ‘situation.’ In the past his sets were functional first, and descriptive of the place or scene second. The following is a description of the set of *Hotel Fuck* from C. Carr’s “Is This Desire?”:

The set has a wacky bordelloish look, with brocaded tasseled drapes across the walls, a red Greek column, a gorilla hanging upside down from the ceiling, striped poles, gold baby dolls, and paintings that look a bit surreal, a little Bosch. No doubt it’s meant to be a hotel of some kind - the kind that will fasten the drapes in place with little skulls. The characters are dressed for the 1920s or thereabouts. (*The Village Voice*)



Of course, any description of a Foreman set would not be complete without some mention of his trademark string and other visual barriers to interfere with the audience's gaze. Carr continues her description of the set of *Hotel Fuck* with the comment that, "across the front of the stage, Foreman has strung his trademark string and Plexiglass. He always vows he's going to leave it out this time, then he always adds it in the end, mostly to create aesthetic distance and density. He thinks he needs it" (*The Village Voice*).

The use of string, referred to in reviews and articles as "Foreman string", in past productions has been used at various points to emphasis objects and finely focus the audience's attention to a certain spot. To further this idea, the string and pointers can over-emphasize an aspect/moment of the play which may have heretofore been assumed or unquestioned. Michael Feingold, in his article "The Spot," describes a moment of *Hotel Fuck* which exemplifies this use of string for creating extreme focus by saying:

The women, only one of whom is actually a character in the piece, seem to have a far easier time coping with the hotel's eccentric demands. For the men, their very openness carries a threat, quintessentially embodied by the heroine of the evening lying on the floor, legs up and open, with the men pointing vectors of Foreman string at her pubic area from all directions. (*Village Voice*)

Here the emphasis provided by the strings foregrounds the openness of the "heroine of the evening" as opposed to the men who, despite the fact they are entirely consumed by her 'pubic area' and are objectifying her, are uncomfortable by her willingness to be objectified. The extreme focus on the moment, centered on her genital area, heightens the contradiction within the men to the point of being hysterical.





Another example of the heightening function of Foreman's use of strings and other visual barriers in his designs is from the following critique of *Pearls for Pigs* (1997) where Marc Robinson observes that the strings, pointers, lines drawn and sheer clutter all contribute to confining the 'central character' to the stage - a metaphor for the 'action' of the play itself:

...the decor of Foreman's production - his customary jungle of clashing patterns, bric-a-brac, paintings, postcards, and hieroglyphs - is more than mere setting. It has a function: to challenge the Maestro to reject it. ... Everywhere in *Pearls for Pigs*, he is fenced in, literally: Strings press on him from above; gnomes wielding pointers pin him down; a coffin-like box encloses him; certain chairs won't let him stand up; lines of tape on the floor, breaking the stage up into quadrants, pen him in wherever he moves. We can always locate him on this grid, which horrifies him. There's no escape from being-there, and that fate causes his hysteria - the panic of sheer presence, the same hysteria invoked by the name of Foreman's theater. (7)

These examples from Foreman's last two productions, *Hotel Fuck* (1999) and *Pearls for Pigs* (1997), where the strings, pointers and other visual barriers are used to emphasize the conflict and the situation contribute to making the audience aware of their act of seeing. Indeed, these visual techniques are as much embedded in creating the hysterical of Foreman's theatre as they were when he started over thirty years ago. They are Foreman's visual tool to focus the minds of the audience as "sharp as a micro-telescope" (Foreman 143).

I believe that while a shift has occurred in the nature of the crisis and his use of the central character in Foreman's recent plays, the aesthetic of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre is still secure in its pursuit of isolating the moment and empowering the imagination of the



individual. I think that instead of hiding from his audience he is exploring avenues he had previously denied himself, and because of his skill and experience is now allowing himself the opportunity for overall subtlety and more emphatic characters. I would like to emphasize the difference between the cultural climates of the late 1960s when Foreman first started his theatre and the far more conservative present in which Foreman is creating today. It is because of this change of climate that Foreman has had to become more concerned with the issues of funding and consequently touring.

The issues of funding and touring are linked as Foreman stated in an interview in 1999 with Markus Wessendorf for *Theater Der Welt/Theater Der Zeit*:

I never wanted to tour because I don't have a permanent organization. It's only when the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] started falling apart in America that I thought I need to find some other source of funding. I had this notion, well, maybe we can make plays to tour and get some income from the theatre that way. Now, as it turns out, I enjoyed touring last year more than I thought I would. Maybe that's partially because I wasn't responsible, somebody else was touring *Pearls for Pigs*, another organization. *Permanent Brain Damage* [1996] was the first play that I'd ever toured from America. (141)

Touring his shows - and allowing others to over-see the productions - can be interpreted as another sign for what has been labeled as "Foreman fleeing his legacy." This could be seen as an extension of taking the focus off himself and placing it solely on the work. This idea aside, however, the need to raise money for the theatre and its school is very real. *Pearls for Pigs* toured and the next show following, known in America as *Paradise Hotel*, also toured.



Here, the issue of funding in the unfriendly arts environment of North America caused Foreman to change the title of his show to something easier for the funding bodies to swallow. According to Carr in her article, “Is This Desire?”, Foreman revealed, “that *Hotel Fuck* is the play’s real name, or will be by the time it tours Europe. ‘The reason we’re calling it *Paradise Hotel* here is for funding.’ His managers convinced him that he couldn’t go to foundations and request money for anything by the name of *Hotel Fuck*. ‘Foreman sells out again,’ he jokes” (*The Village Voice*). Undaunted, Foreman will tour with his newest work, *Bad Boy Nietzsche*, with stops in Paris, Berlin and Tokyo after its run at St. Mark’s Church in New York.

Whether to simply raise money, or to facilitate Foreman’s wish to have his work stand alone without its creator present, the fact that the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre is exploring the possibility of touring greatly increases the chances of exposing the work to a greater audience and spreading its influence to other theatres, writers and practitioners. Shawn-Marie Garret says of Foreman’s decision to explore the possibilities of touring in her article, “Dummied Down: *Pearls for Pigs* at the Hartford Stage”:

Last spring, Foreman decided to send one of his plays off on a national tour, a move which could only further expose him and reinforce his position as the exemplar of a certain kind of theater. Simultaneously, it forced him to sacrifice the possibility of exercising obsessive control, to absent himself in favor of disconnected, representative objects, words, choreographic patterns, and ideas to be trotted out before anonymous audiences in anonymous theaters in the manner of most conventional theater oblivious to the notion of context, whether historical, geographical, philosophical or local.





Because of the nature of Foreman's art, these specific problems framing the play are also framed within the play, which mocks itself, mocks the audience, mocks the author, mocks the theater. (*Theater* 16)

The sacrifice Garrett is describing is the greater exposure of Foreman's work at the cost of his commodification. Her description of "anonymous audiences in anonymous theaters oblivious to the notion of context" denotes the lack of reason behind their attendance except to experience Foreman's work as "the exemplar of a certain kind of theater" (Garrett 16). The mocking she mentions of the audience, the author, the theatre resides in the fact that Foreman's theatre is designed to question how meaning and social constructions are created, but through the act of touring, Foreman's theatre has confirmed its role as an institution and, using the words of Jean Baudrillard, has become an artifact in the living museum of the United States. However, the environment surrounding the funding of the arts in the U.S. is such that the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre had little choice but to tour. The lack of funding for the arts in the United States (and sympathetically in Canada as well) has reached a critical point. When Markus Wessendorf asked Foreman during his interview for *Theater Der Welt/Theater Der Zeit* about the future financing of theatre he said:

It's hopeless in America. ... I have been able to sustain my work because I had a little money, so I didn't have to pay myself out of the theatre, and whatever money I got (doing opera or 'classical theatre') could go to my productions. Who else in America at this point is able to continue and do significant, exploratory, adventurous work? Have I forgotten anybody? I don't know. It is practically impossible. And, obviously, the climate in the country right now is making it more and more



impossible. (*Theater Der Welt/Theater Der Zeit* 143)

Foreman feels this funding climate has come about because of, “the corporate takeover of everything in the Western world. Governments are no longer entities that control things, it’s corporations like Disney” (143). Foreman has stated that he has been able to survive because he hasn’t had to pay himself out of his theatre - but he is one of the very lucky few. Even though he has had to resort to making his theatre a commodity to package and sell on tour, the greater effect of the current situation is that Foreman couldn’t think of anyone else independently doing “significant, exploratory, adventurous work” based in America. It is no surprise that his audiences, even though he is becoming better known and accepted, are consistently small if there is no other avant-garde theatre as challenging as Foreman’s being created. Still, Foreman is not immune and is effected in his choices by issues of funding and what is deemed worthy of funding. An example of this pressure is having to change the name of *Hotel Fuck* to *Paradise Hotel* for the American audiences.

Foreman, himself, has spoken out on the issue of funding - aimed not only at the government and the funding institutions but also to the audiences and “supporters” of the arts. If the people who support and encourage the arts were to organize and make their views known as do the “censorship-minded conservative groups” who are working against the arts then the “culture wars”, as Foreman refers to them, would be better balanced and the arts would have a fighting chance. Charles McNulty wrote in his article, “Foreman of the Board”, that:

While accepting the Best Play honors for *Benita Canova* and *Pearls for Pigs* at the 1997 *Village Voice* Obie Awards ceremony, Richard Foreman gave a rousing,



Clifford Odets-like speech about the gravity of the current culture wars. There is a battle going on, he admonished the audience, trying to debunk the cynical view that the crisis was mere journalistic claptrap. (*The Village Voice*)

But if the arts community, the same community who praise his work through awards such as the Obies, does not take the crisis seriously and organize a sustained resistance, then there is little hope against the united front of the conservative right. Foreman's is already one of the last of the avant-garde theatre communities in New York and although he holds events like the ForemanFest without an audience and a community to support it, much of his frustration with theatre is the lack of support. McNulty continues by saying that, "after attending many of the productions in 'No Strings Attached,' the third annual (and perhaps final) ForemanFest, it became obvious to me why the plaintive tone of Foreman's acceptance speech seemed directed as much at Downtown theatergoers as at the Uptown powers that be" (*Village Voice*).

Despite the small audiences and a lack of community, over the last three years there has been a small festival of Foreman's work, called the ForemanFest where many new directors, of different levels of achievement have tried their hand at tackling Foreman's material. Foreman said during my recent phone interview that usually two or three of the productions are quite interesting while most are more "primitive." Charles McNulty, in his article, "Foreman of the Board," describes his view of the ForemanFest this way:

...the ForemanFest could be accurately described in consumer-guide jargon as "hit or miss." But make no mistake: it's not intended to serve as a "Best of" retrospective.

In fact, many of the plays donated by Foreman are from his trunk marked





“unproduced,” while the more recognizable titles are treated as opportunities for directors to unslavishly create their own ecstatic visions. True, not all of the productions are beyond student quality, and a few smash by like car wrecks, but the high points amount to a series of maverick tributes to an artist who prizes nothing more than theatrical autonomy. (*Village Voice*)

Now that Foreman has won several awards, is gaining acceptance and has had a series of interns work with him, the occurrence of others directing his work is becoming more frequent. This is imperative if the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre is to continue and an important factor in that continuation for Foreman is innovation in the directing of his works. Foreman hopes that further productions of his plays will keep them alive:

I’ve seen perhaps a dozen of my plays directed by others. In general other directors try too hard to copy my style of *mise en scène*. *Pearls for Pigs*, the play I just opened in Hartford and which will be touring Europe and the U.S., opened the same day in a French production in Paris. And I understand it’s staged in a radically different style from my own. That’s what I’ve always hoped for. Gertrude Stein wrote all these plays that for many, many years people couldn’t conceive of staging, but people are starting to do them now. I hope other directors will find ways to do my plays that are not the ways I would do them. (Bernstein, Danto, et. al 32)

The impetus behind having new directors with fresh and different visions for producing the plays is also carried into the possibilities of having new scripts created from other playwrights using the material from Foreman’s notebooks. Online, you can find the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre website where you can read/print the material from Foreman’s



notebooks (from which he created his plays) as well as learn the dates and location of the next production, sign up as an intern of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre School, and read Richard Foreman's bio and the history of his productions. Foreman explains the idea behind placing the raw material from his notebooks on the internet this way:

I make that material available freely to anybody who wants to take it, rearrange it, edit it, make their own plays out of it, much the same way that I do. It's true that when I am making plays these days I rewrite considerably, and I don't know how happy I would be if people totally rewrote it. But I guess that's okay. All I ask is that when they do the play they say in the program, "The text of this play is based on material taken from Richard Foreman's collected notebooks that are freely available on his web-site." (Wessendorf 143)

As a means to keep the act of writing interesting for himself, Foreman is making use of the internet to perhaps spawn some new ideas and combinations of words to become the material for future productions. He expressed to me during our phone conversation that he hasn't done much writing lately because he has been in production most of the time and, so far, there hasn't been much response to the website. However, he said during his interview to Marc Wessendorf that:

I would really love if people would take the material on the web-site, and they would make of my material things that I could not imagine making of my material, and send me back plays, and then I would stage those plays. It would be great if they would arrange my material in ways that I couldn't have imagined. That would be stimulating to me. (143)



Foreman has also experimented with different manipulations of the raw materials from his notebooks and past plays to spawn further insights and resonances from the words. Further in the same interview he revealed:

I have taken a couple of my plays and rewritten them, so that line by line they go backwards. I started with the last line of the play, and then the previous one, and then the line previous to that, and I must say that some of the psychic jumps that are thereby produced seem very, very interesting to me. It seems just as interesting as Burroughs''s cut-up technique. ...it's hard to imagine evoking any resonance from really working in that way, but maybe I will some day. (143)

Regardless of where and how Foreman is finding inspiration lately, after more than thirty years he is feeling the fatigue from producing a continuous series of Ontological-Hysteric plays using his rigorous method and from the sheer density of the works. He sees the website as a possible source of fresh ideas but also admits that, "such a dream probably does reflect the kind of exhaustion with literature as such, perhaps pressured by the digital revolution, and a desire to use language no longer as language, no longer as literature, but to use it as sort of pure 'synapse-surfing', or something of that sort" (Wessendorf, 143). Is the idea of "synapse-surfing" and the possibilities inherent therein as a way of approaching text yet another step deeper into freeing the mind to be aware of the impulse and the moment, or is it slipping back into the realm of Dada as simply a stream of random words? Dada was rejected in Foreman's second manifesto because the words are equal in their randomness and would thus lull the audience into intellectual slumber. Still, these are ideas Foreman is grappling with to keep the spark of writing alive for himself and his theatre.





Much of the future of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre lies in the hands of its future directors and writers, especially as Foreman is seen as trying to back away from the spotlight of its stage to leave room for the play. He is, in fact, leaving room not just for the creation to take focus but for other visions and ideas to come forward. Foreman is openly encouraging others to direct his work, to make plays with his words, and is taking interns to train. The infusion of new creative ideas into the body of work of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre with new directors and the possibility of new plays seems to be a viable solution to counter his own difficulty in writing, especially while taking the time to produce and tour his shows. It seems that rather than “fleeing his legacy” as some critics have claimed, Foreman is working to continue the legacy of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre.

Perhaps out of this drive to have other directors produce his works, Foreman allowed a new Edmonton theatre group, Manual Transmission, to perform the Canadian Premiere of *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* in exchange for only archive photos and video documentation. Chapter three will describe the process and outcome of the production of *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* here in Edmonton and some of the response to the production by the Edmonton audience and media.



# Chapter 3

## Using Richard Foreman's Ideas In Production

Heidi Taylor and I formed Manual Transmission Theatre with a mandate to provide Edmonton/Albertan audiences with challenging avant-garde theatre. For us, the obvious first choice was the work of Richard Foreman and on May 12 through to May 23, 1999, Manual Transmission Theatre, ran the Canadian Premiere of Richard Foreman's *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* at the Northern Light Theatre's Third Space in Edmonton. I was the Producer, Director, and Sound Designer, Heidi played the Female Student and was the movement coach for the production. The show also featured the talents of the following cast and crew: Jimmy Hodges - Professor; José Teodoro - Male Student; Catherine Green, Elyne Quan, Matthew Kloster and Wesley Gillis - Gnomes; the Stage Manager was Linda Knopke; Set/Costume/Light Designers - Mariko Heidelk and Marissa Kochanski; and Chelsea MacLeod as our Publicist/Production Manager. The show was the culmination of five months work during which we created for ourselves a method and approach to this particular script and to the aesthetic of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. Heidi Taylor was the only member of the company who had seen work by Richard Foreman and I, at that point, had only a theoretical understanding of his theatre, but between the two of us we spear-headed the project. We filled out a performing arts grant from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (AFA) because without financial assistance it would have been highly unlikely that we could have produced the show. Much to our surprise, because of the other highly talented groups



and individuals we knew we were competing with, the AFA accepted our grant proposal to produce Foreman's play.

Over the five months of rehearsal we tackled the challenges of the script such as "inventing behavior," dealing with many props, and controlling stage traffic. We wrestled with the theories behind the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre: isolating the moment, frustrating the impulse, and avoiding a linear connection between events. We dealt with issues such as the representation of power and of gender onstage. We, as Edmonton Theatre artists, were forced to learn/unlearn our own methodology in regard to the production. Also, because a Foreman play had never been done in Edmonton I expected the audiences and the media would be challenged as they had never been exposed to work of this kind and probably lacked a vocabulary to express their reactions and thoughts to the show. The media gave us generous coverage and were quite supportive although they found it quite difficult to describe the show to their readers/listeners. The Catch-22 of producing and selling a show that is designed to avoid easy definition and dismissal by the audience is examined later. My purpose in describing aspects of the rehearsal process, the staging of the play, and reactions to it is to set up a dialogue between Foreman's theories and their actual practice as we engaged with them.

Let me make it clear that even though the script has extremely few stage directions and didn't actually call for the use of pointer sticks or Foreman string (white string with black dashes, like a cut-line), we intentionally made use of some of Foreman's design concepts and directorial methods. Even though the production was very much a product of the work of Manual Transmission Theatre, we emulated what we understood of Foreman's methods and





aesthetics and produced what we felt was our best interpretation of an Ontological-Hysteric Theatre piece.

As the Producer/Director, my initial interpretation of *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* was that it is like a Dadaist version of David Mamet's *Oleanna* in that the conflict is centered on issues of power and sexual manipulation. The metaphor of sexual manipulation between a female student and a male professor was initially useful in defining the characters and allowing the actors a means with which to understand the play. Unlike Mamet's play, however, Foreman's piece does not develop a traditional a plot and set of objectives behind the conflict between the characters, only an on-going intellectual wrestling-match over who has higher status and who controls the space at any given time. The status was aggressively given and taken by the three speaking characters using everything from intellectual prowess to sheer bullying in their power struggles against each other. Nowhere in the script are there specific references to threats to do with assignments, grades, or sexual intimidation but much is implied through the dialogue:

PROFESSOR. In a certain play entitled "My Head Was a Sledgehammer," a certain character falls deeply in love with his mirror image, although his mirror image doesn't resemble him in many important ways. But is a much more beautiful image. It's a magic mirror, and the character who has so fallen in love says things...that seem beside the point, not expressing love really, but do they...

MALE STUDENT. Do they what?

PROFESSOR. Do they win him the love, of women?

MALE STUDENT. Women in general?



FEMALE STUDENT. Be more specific. (94)

I realized early in the process that it would be necessary for me, as the director, to have a concept of the play similar to the metaphor of Mamet's *Oleanna* to set up and work against; a framework on which to hang ideas and subsequently tear them down. I learned that the goal of Foreman's work is not to focus the audience's attention onto a single interpretation but to frustrate the impulse (away) from that reductive point. Using this idea, I chose to make certain moments of the play about sexual manipulation between the Professor and Female Student *very clear* so that I could more effectively disrupt that 'through-line' in the succeeding moments. This practice, in turn, emphasized even more those moments when the power shifted between the characters. I learned that at least some structure/construction, even in the abstract, had to be present to make the disruption/desconstruction effective. With a conflict and situation established, we were then able to define the characters. The script called for five gnomes and three speaking roles: the Professor, Female Student and Male Student. The following is a description of the three speaking roles or "the scholars," as we called them.

The Professor - arguably the central character of the play - is a figure of authority by virtue of his position but is frustrated by his impotence to exert or sustain his power over his students and the space. The harder he tries, the less power he has. Throughout the play he is desperately trying to re-establish his position as leader and contributor to attaining/broadcasting truth. For example the Professor says: "Well, here's what I'm here for. I want to be in a place from which truth - now we have a problem - truth - Gushes forth. I want to be a place THROUGH which truth...passes" (Foreman 89). In addition to regaining



his position in relation to truth he is also seeking reinforcement through the attention of women as the following line indicates, “My secret desire is - win love - from many beautiful women” (87). His desire is no secret as he repeats this sentiment several times throughout the play both verbally and physically.

The Female Student - the only women’s role indicated by the script - is, of course, the object of the Professor’s objectifying eye. At times she seems naïve about her objectification, at other times she encourages it through teasing the Professor (and even the audience) using both innuendo and physical taunting. She is the Professor’s foil in that she often manipulates the Professor and even the Male Student through the use of her sexuality. It is she, who most often interrupts the action and takes it temporarily into a completely different ‘play’ when she says lines like: “Imagine a play called ‘The Pretend Hat,’ what could happen in such a play?” (90). She commands both the Professor and Male Student to perform different tasks and even kicks the Professor in the stomach. The two males allow her to do so because of the implied possibility of sex with her - a fact she is well aware of. The following is a short example of dialogue demonstrating her awareness of her objectification:

PROFESSOR. There are many things about these oh-so-desirable women I can’t justify  
to myself ---

FEMALE STUDENT. Well, you like my company, admit it.

MALE STUDENT. True, you like the aggravation, Professor. It energizes.

PROFESSOR. I like that, but I don’t like its source. I like its results.

FEMALE STUDENT. It’s the same thing.

MALE STUDENT. It’s the same thing, Professor. (93)





The Female Student is frustrated, however, by the fact that while she can wield power over the moment by her sexuality, she is recognized *only* for that sexuality and not for her mental prowess. She is an eager and questioning student, exemplified by lines such as, “I’m thrilled to be included” (91), but denied the chance to advance and be recognized because she is a woman.

I understand the Male Student as having a foot in both camps. He is interested in the Female Student sexually and also wants to usurp the Professor’s position. The Male Student sometimes allies with the Female Student in her manipulations of the Professor. What he gains by doing so is a chance of winning the favor of the Female Student (which he never quite does) and undermining the figure of authority, the Professor - so that he too, can take his position of authority. At other times, however, the Male Student is allied with the Professor against the Female Student when they share a “male moment” or a reference between them that excludes the Female Student and sets up moments of a “boy’s club.” The camaraderie between the Male Student and the Professor comes easily, even after episodes where the Male Student has menaced the Professor. Ultimately, it is the Female Student who is always seen as an ‘other’ as the men bond against her.

What the conflict of this piece implies, and where I, as the director, feel the stakes for the show are embedded, is that the Professor is working to maintain his position of power as Professor (and to exert the power inherent with that position) while the two students are trying to remove/destroy him. For the Female Student, the Professor represents her stumbling block and she cannot advance in the world until he is removed. The Male Student wants to replace the Professor as the ‘next in line’ and continue the previous system of male privilege.



Foreman has said on several occasions that he is not a political writer/artist and that, he doesn't want to "clarify anything" (*Theater* 82). However, a situation like the one found in *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* is loaded with political meaning. Though a moral or ethical position is not overtly stated, theatre such as this pushes the mind of the audience member into a lateral mode of thinking enabling her/him to acknowledge all possibilities and to see that the situation from which those possibilities arise is about power. The audience will decide who is in control and who is being manipulated. Though the plot is not linear and there is no definable message, this is a political play because any relationship represented onstage demonstrates the ideologies of the creator(s) and/or the audience who interprets it. This refers to the discussion in chapter one involving how Foreman's methods work to expose and undermine the enframed perspective of the audience by the dominant ideology. With his agenda to make the audience aware and questioning of their own perception makes me question whether Richard Foreman can refer to himself as being in no way political even while he is creating a politically charged situation for his audience members and making them aware of their interaction with it. An example of a politically charged situation from *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* can be found in the following excerpt:

PROFESSOR. In order to clarify this, I shall now tear to pieces, an important envelope, within which...*Professor goes, tears up the envelope, pauses.* I forgot what was in the envelope. But that's OK. Because it illustrates my real and most secret import.

FEMALE STUDENT. I don't know how to say this Professor. But what you just did really turns me on.



PROFESSOR. Not really?

FEMALE STUDENT. Really.

PROFESSOR. You're not lying to me?

FEMALE STUDENT. Truth is, I'm not lying.

PROFESSOR. How could I possibly know who's lying?

FEMALE STUDENT. Try eliminating the possibility that I'm lying, Professor.

PROFESSOR. *Pauses, holds head. Just a minute. Goes to drawer, tears up more envelopes, all do an aggressive dance.*

FEMALE STUDENT. *Collapses. (95)*

The way we staged this section had the aggressive dance as a very sexual dance (though no one was touching) which ended with the Female Student collapsing center stage in orgasmic convulsions. The sexual connotations of this exchange are unavoidable and can be very funny onstage but the message of a sexual exchange having taken place between a Professor and his female student was made clear to the audience. I have spent the time illustrating the “political” meaning of the content because it shows that Foreman’s Ontological-Hysteric Theatre operates at a political level when it challenges narrative expectations, in this case involving expectations between Professors and Female Students, even if it also confirms them. Instead of supplying the audience with a political perspective of the situation, Foreman’s alienation techniques estrange the audience’s perceptions of the scene so that new insights are encouraged which in turn call into question previously unexamined assumptions. Having the audience witness events and situations onstage which explore power/knowledge relationships and encouraging them to experience such events in a different way *is* a political act as





discussed in chapter one..

The other ‘bodies’ onstage throughout the show, although they are not directly referred to in the script, are the gnomes. In the introduction to *My Head Was A Sledgehammer*, Foreman wrote: “My own production featured five additional performers, dressed as gnomes, who interacted with the three main characters throughout the play, bringing on a series of bizarre props and scenic elements, dancing with the actors, etc., etc” (87). I, too, chose to employ “additional performers” to carry out such stage directions as “A stuffed horse given to Male Student” (90) or “His shoes are transformed into shoes with attached loaves of long french bread” (98) and to manipulate strings, props and the speaking actors as well. Unlike Foreman, who makes his “additional performers” look as similar as possible, as photo documentation of his productions suggest, I chose to cast my gnomes so that they were all of very different body shapes and heights. I thought this would lend itself to more interesting stage compositions and help give them a physical “personality.” Also, I chose to have two male and two female gnomes to allow more possibilities regarding the theme of manipulation through the use of the gnomes rather than all male gnomes as Foreman did for his production in 1994.

The gnomes became just as essential to the production as the speaking roles and through the use of gesture, movement and non-verbal sound they each developed clear and distinct gnome personalities. To aid them in their roles and to solidify the design of the piece, we decided that the stage was a laboratory for the purpose of analyzing the speaking roles in different situations and that the gnomes were the lab technicians. The audience observed the ‘action’ in the lab through an imaginary two-way mirror (as in interrogation rooms) - the



gnomes knew of the audience, the ‘scholars’ did not. The gnomes would provide props and manipulate the action to ‘show’ the audience the outcome of the ‘experiments.’ They would use string or the pointer sticks to draw the audience’s attention to specific points to be observed at that time. The following is taken from “The Gnome Handbook” which I wrote and provided for my gnome actors to give them some guidelines in approaching their roles:

You are a magic creature living in a magic dimension parallel to the mortal dimension of the “scholars”. The audience are omnipresent creatures who are capable of understanding everything and can see both dimensions at once. The theatre is a classroom to train the audience who have yet to reach maturity in their Godhead. Your task in this classroom is to demonstrate situations, lessons and metaphors using the mortal realm and the three mortals provided as a tool. The scholars cannot see you. You can see them and - because this is a special place - you can see the audience. (Owen, rehearsal notes)

Even though the gnomes were dressed in lab coats, the audience was not otherwise informed of our conceptual framework of the laboratory and the purpose of the gnomes. Instead, it was a tool to give the gnomes a solid purpose behind their actions.

The auditions for the show were held on January 9 and 12, 1999 with Heidi Taylor and I leading the exercises. Heidi has physical theatre experience and had gone through a summer intensive workshop with the One Yellow Rabbit group from Calgary the previous year. Her experience there provided her with several exercises we found extremely useful in having the gnomes “find their bodies” and develop a vocabulary of non-verbal gestures. She was the movement coach and led the movement exercises while the exercises or ‘games’ I led



during the audition process dealt more with concentration and commitment. There were quite a few very strong candidates for the roles but we were able to choose the cast by visualizing the different combinations of bodies and movement styles we wanted.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Foreman is very interested in having other directors produce his plays. Since I had not seen any of Foreman's work first-hand but had only studied it, I took solace in this knowledge that Foreman welcomed fresh direction in the staging of his works for I would have been unable to duplicate his style even if I wished to. In the introduction to *My Head Was A Sledgehammer*, Foreman wrote: "I prefer to print these texts with minimal stage directions, just as they are written - in the form I use when I start to conceive a production myself. I believe they then function as open forms into which a director can project his or her personal vision. And I certainly imagine a play such as *My Head Was a Sledgehammer* being staged in many different ways" (87). I was liberated by the knowledge that there was no 'right' way to direct the piece and that the goal was to produce Foreman's work, not to reproduce it. I was free to explore whatever means and outcomes I felt the production demanded. My choice was to start the rehearsal process by working with the gnomes and the speaking roles (the Scholars) separately and then to bring them together and introduce the technical elements.

The first few rehearsals with only the gnomes were composed mostly of physical exercises designed to help the actors find their "gnome bodies" - their individual stances, the ways they move, where they place their centers of gravity, their physical limitations, their attitudes and the focus of their gaze. This was a gradual process led by Heidi to help the actors develop a vocabulary of gestures with which to draw upon as well as to create an





individual personality through movement. Each gnome needed to be consistent and individual in how she/he moved as well as being able to perform the difficult functions required of them without injuring themselves during performance.

Once there was a basis of physical characterizations we tackled the points in the script where Foreman gave the cryptic stage direction of “invented behavior”. This two word stage direction appeared quite often throughout the script, usually following a line like, “Imagine a play called ...” or placed immediately following a strong moment in the script to deny the impulse to continue the momentum of that thought. We decided to deal with this direction in two ways; either a longer (5 to 30 seconds) movement piece following the theme of the “imagined play,” or a shorter, momentary gesture to a key word or phrase. Some of the imagined plays were: “Fingers Alert,” “Dogs On Duty,” “Broken Promises,” “The Pretend Hat,” “Mysteries of Arrogance,” and “My Head Was A Sledgehammer.” Some of the other invented behaviors and shorter gestures were: “parking the car,” “all fall down,” “time dance,” “pleasant dreams, Professor,” “here’s my hat, what do you think of that,” “another accident,” “truth travels between two people,” “breaking eggs/heart,” “twist an arm,” “all kneel for this,” to name a few. There was a game of slow motion frozen tag, a gathering of knives and even a full cast bow within the play in places of the “invented behavior”. During the course of the play the gnomes would hand to or take away props, including a large stuffed horse, from the scholars. At other times they would physically manipulate the scholars by picking them up off the floor or even throwing them into the air as they did during “the explosion.” They enacted the scenarios and events imagined and mused about by the scholars as well as steered the audience’s focus through the use of string and pointers. The gnomes,



who were briefly mentioned in the introduction to Foreman's script, were ever-present entities who both manipulated the scholars and their environment as well as enacting and emphasizing their thoughts and actions.

At the first rehearsal for the scholars, I had the actors for these three speaking roles on their feet "blocking" the show. As opposed to more traditional forms of theatre where it can be beneficial to conduct some "table work" and define characters and motivations before moving to the stage, I felt it was better to set up each moment by moving the actors around, working more with visual composition and allowing the dialogue to develop meaning from the physicalization of the action. I initially approached the direction of the script using what I refer to as "the Beckett" model in that the actors should hear and play the rhythm and music of the words first and allow the audience to find the meaning, if any, later. This was a slow process at first as the actors had to learn this different method, but we gained momentum as we all developed a stronger idea of the pace and style of the show. I found the greatest challenge was *not* to make the lines make (linear) sense but to pick and choose which lines to tie together and which to blast apart. The actors, too, having been trained to draw meaning and emotion from the spoken words were challenged to provide what I was asking of them: to work against the flow (sometimes) and break out of the moment even as it developed. While we deciphered, dissected and blocked the first few pages we discussed the conventions internal to the show; such as: whether the actors are aware of the audience, whether the characters had continuity, and what the setting meant. By the time we combined the two worlds of the scholars and the gnomes, the play's own interior (anti)-logic took over and the process solidified.



Individually, both the gnomes and the scholars were doing work that was “dense with possibilities” and when we brought the two worlds together, about a third of the way through the rehearsal process the possible meanings and manipulations of each moment of the play grew exponentially. We incorporated the gnomes’ movements and gestures around the blocking of the scholars over the subsequent weeks and started to see the piece come together as the gnomes were now present to bring on and take off prop pieces, to use the strings and pointers for emphasis and to exaggerate certain events.

As we approached the dates of performance we started to incorporate the many props and sound cues for the show. Props are very important to Foreman’s plays, not just because of the sheer number of them, but because of their role in defining or disrupting the moment. Often, the lines and actions are centered around their presence and use. For example, at one point the Professor is handed a violin by the gnomes and the next line spoken by the Female Student is, “What a beautiful violin, Professor” (89). Some of the other props called for were: an Indian headdress, shoes with apples attached (and then bread), a large stuffed horse, tall cothorni, several knives, envelopes, books and an egg. Choreographing the gnomes to move the props on and off as well as perform their gestures and “imagined plays” involved very careful planning and required enormous stamina and concentration of their part.

The stage itself was a square designated by black curtains hung on three sides with a black floor and white and black (in a cut-line pattern) string encompassing the stage. Upstage there were three lines of string, the sides had two and the downstage edge had one - like a railing. For flooring we used a spongy carpet underlay which made some of the physical demands on the actors safer. This we painted black. Within the clinically utilitarian black and





white box we created there was a single chair, desk, podium and bookshelf. In essence, it was a pragmatically neutral laboratory which allowed the audience to observe the scholars.

During the rehearsal process, I had already been incorporating sound into the piece since the sound was integral to the process. On the other hand, the lighting design was very simple to implement. For the lighting of the play we chose to use bare work lights circling the stage. This created a very bright space with aggressively sharp shadows and bright spots. Our footlights were 500 Watt industrial work lights and the rest of the stage was lit by hanging work lights (such as the ones found in garages) which hung off the poles that suspended the string that lined the stage. Except for a couple of burnt-out bulbs and a power failure, the setup worked quite well.

The sound design, however, was much more demanding. I created the sound design and ran the sound-scape myself each show as Foreman is famous for doing in his own theatre. First of all, the three speaking roles all wore radio microphones and were amplified to sound much louder than their own voices in order to give the distorted effect of being able to see them move their lips and gesticulate while their voices were coming from elsewhere. This use of microphones also allowed me to have the actors off-stage at certain points of the play but to have their voices still “present” without the physical source. Also, because of the small space and the volume needed to balance with the actor’s real projecting voices, the microphones gave the actors’ voices a tinny, unnatural quality bordering on feed-back. This effect unsettled the audience’s perception of the speaking subject since they could be listening to a physically present (or absent) performer.

Another benefit to having the actors’ voices amplified using individual microphones



was that I could then manipulate their voices with audio effects. At the end of the play when the Professor repeats the words, “One more time! One more time!” (101), I added an echo to his signal and together with the building sound behind it, it created a cacophony of sound. Another example was lowering the pitches of the voices of both the Female Student and the Professor when the Female Student kicks the Professor in the stomach. The sequence ran as follows: the Professor - who was on all fours - said the cue line of, “Strange, to me science has no particular aroma” (98). Everyone onstage immediately shifted to movement in slow motion and the Female Student then ran (in slow-motion) to the Professor, greatly exaggerated pulling back her leg and kicking him in the stomach. Her breathing sounded like a monster’s, very loud and deep. The Professor had a very exaggerated slow-motion reaction to the kick, with a suitably deep and grotesque roar and then everyone onstage went back into real time on his next line of, “Ow! Why did you do that?” (98) The effect was not unlike the highly exaggerated fights between Inspector Clouseau and Kato in the Pink Panther movies - only this was live onstage and quite an effective spectacle and well defined moment.

The other aspect of the sound-design was sampling and composing of short sound loops to add in to several places in the script. Starting from what I had read of Foreman’s use of tape loops and borrowed sounds, I collected quite a few sounds and short pieces to mix into the play. Unlike Foreman’s method, my technique of building sound-design used a digital sampler which can mix and manipulate the sounds further in addition to simply creating continuous loops. I used sound to support certain gestures, many of the invented behaviors as well as the “imagined plays.” Using the sampler, I was able to have the sounds start and stop with cues from the actors and thus could reinforce the pace of the show rather than



hinder it. I was able to support the action onstage by providing, for example, heart-wrenching music for the invented behavior we labeled “Broken Promises” or aggressively shift the feel of the moment with the inclusion of loud music or sound such as during “the explosion” or the applause during the full cast bow two-thirds through the show.

When I did actually compose music used during the show (such as the pre-show and post-show music, “fingers alert”, “time dance”), I emulated the model demonstrated by Philip Glass. His music does not hinge on conflicts and resolutions of chords but instead uses contrasting rhythms and textures in the sound. Instead of a chord progression that leads the listener to a resolution - in the linear school of music with harmony and melody - there are sounds and rhythms that at times conflict and cause tension and at others converge and tie together. Where the music of Philip Glass and some electronic music (which uses samplers and sequencers as I do) mesh is in this non-linear way of creating music. Philip Glass uses many simple rhythms but adds and subtracts layers of rhythms and choices of instruments to modulate the sound produced. So, too, much electronic music, through the use of filters and processors, modulates the sound while the rhythm(s) are repeated and layers are added or subtracted. In both cases, the music traverses a span of time yet the “music” is not a modulation of chords and manipulation of a linear melody - but a modulation of the quality of the sounds and rhythms. The listener is aware of lateral changes in the sound of the music, not in the linear progression of the music.

This is what I feel Foreman is doing onstage with the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. The play, *My Head Was a Sledgehammer*, does not take the audience on a predestined journey with the Professor and the two students but instead shows us a modulation of a





situation. Objects change, events happen, but there is no plot for the audience to tell their friends about after - there is no melody to hum on the way home. This is how I approached the music for the play, and to a large extent, the play itself. As Philip Glass and some of the new electronic music is challenging listeners to appreciate music in a different way, so too is Foreman showing the audience an alternative way to see/experience theatre.

The show was performed at Northern Light Theatre's Third Space in north/central Edmonton. Upon entering the space an audience member would see fifty seats set up in five rows of ten chairs, facing a performance area that was twenty-four feet square. When the show starts, the room lights are turned off and the preshow music fades out, the three speaking actors take their places and the stage lighting is turned on. Immediately the Female Student says, "OK Mr. Professor. Are you as weird as I think you are?" (88) and the Professor replies with, "Not likely" (88). At this point they enter into a slow circling of each other like professional wrestlers while loud percussive music plays and all the gnomes enter to watch the fight. As quickly as it started, the circling and music stop and the Female Student faces the audience and says, "Disturbed? You hear voices, Professor?" (88) The dialogue continues:

PROFESSOR. I'm lucky that way.

FEMALE STUDENT. I'd say, weird.

PROFESSOR. I feel connected.

FEMALE STUDENT. Connected to what?

PROFESSOR. To the source of my voices.

FEMALE STUDENT. OK. That's weird.



PROFESSOR. ...Are you weird, or am I weird.

FEMALE STUDENT. What's the criteria?

PROFESSOR. Let me invite you - come a little closer.

FEMALE STUDENT. In what sense, Professor?

MALE STUDENT. The question is: what can he do with one hand tied behind his back?

PROFESSOR. My secret desire is - win love - from many beautiful women.

FEMALE STUDENT. I'll pretend I didn't hear that sentiment, Professor.

PROFESSOR. I'm speaking of things closest to my heart.

MALE STUDENT. Notice what's on her wrist, Professor?

PROFESSOR. A very beautiful watch. (88)

During this exchange the Professor moves downstage followed by the Female Student. The Male Student doesn't move but stays left of centre. The Female Student, even though her words are not inviting moves enticingly, and stops down right with one hand on her hips and her other pushing her hair back, exposing her ear and watch. The gnomes, meanwhile have completed a tableau of "hear no evil, see no evil" upstage and by the Male Student's line of "Notice what's on her wrist" have picked up their pointer sticks and are pointing at her watch from various places.

The expectation of the Female Student to do something while all the focus is placed on her wrist is denied. The moment is held and then broken with a short dialogue between the Male Student and the Professor concerning religious observations until a violin and bow are placed in the Professor's outstretched hands. The Female Student complements the beauty of the instrument and the ensuing exchange centres on the violin:



FEMALE STUDENT. I'll bet you play better than that, Professor.

PROFESSOR. - I scratch out terrible noises, which I like doing in private.

FEMALE STUDENT. You're saying that just to provoke me, Professor.

PROFESSOR. Not at all. (88)

At this point the Professor "plays" the violin. There is very loud and distorted violin music and the gnomes and students succumb to a tortured snake charm-like dance. As soon as it finishes, two gnomes snatch the violin from the Professor. Soon after the Female Student says, "OK Professor. Imagine a play called 'Fingers Alert.' What could happen in such a play" (88). Everyone does their version of "Fingers Alert" until the Female Student calls another play, "Dogs on Duty." This second play continues until the Professor is given an apple and he says, "Did you ever, see this in real life, madam?" (89) The Professor moves to centre stage and holds up the apple upon which time a loud chord sung by choral voices is heard and the gnomes and students slowly circle the Professor while looking at the apple. This extreme slow motion and sound is sustained for more than a minute creating a forced calm over the stage until the Professor lowers the apple and says to the Male Student, "You just lied to me" (89).

The following exchange involves a discussion about truth which ends with the Male Student eating a page out of a book. The two students then challenge the Professor as to whether he knows the name of every book in his "oh-so-extensive library." They have the Professor close his eyes and pull a book off the shelf. The Male Student says, "I already wrote the name of the book I predicted you'd pick, and sealed my guess in this envelope" (90). The Female Student opens the envelope and reveals the title is "Dossier of Fear" which





the Professor says he doesn't have. However, the Professor looks and says, "You're quite right. The book is entitled 'Dossier of Fear.' But I'm convinced that heretofore I had no such book. *Looks*. Its pages are all blank pages" (90). The Male Student replies with, "I could have secretly hidden that book in your collection. Isn't that possible, Professor?" (90) Here the moment is designed to make a mockery of the Professor, and indirectly the knowledge and position he represents.

Everyone enters into another play called "Broken Promises." This play is lead by the Male Student, the gnomes gesture and sigh in unison as heart-wrenching violin music plays. The moment is calm and slow designed to be emotional, especially with the Male Student's line within this section where he says, "Welcome. Let me tell you a story in the center of which I hide a very personal message" (90). He is about to speak again when the Professor interrupts (and the moment is broken) with, "There might be enough time here to explain something" (90). This is the start of the section leading to the explosion a few lines further where the Male Student and Professor run downstage and stop on their tippy-toes and then fall back upstage into little balls which explode by jumping high into the air with the assistance of the gnomes. The action is reinforced by loud sound leading up to a loud explosion as the remaining gnomes leap sideways downstage.

The play continues in a similar manner for just over an hour becoming increasingly dense in its content and problematizations of the situation as the characters start to call each other professor and accuse each other of being silly. It ends in a loud celebration of chaos with the Professor standing on tall cothorni and the gnomes carrying out disparate silly acts:

FEMALE STUDENT. Hello again.



PROFESSOR. Oh, very silly.

MALE STUDENT. Do better than that, Professor.

PROFESSOR. OK. That's un-alterably - SILLY, Professor -

MALE & FEMALE STUDENTS. Ohhh yeah... *They collapse to floor as all hell breaks loose and THE PROFESSOR starts ranting.*

PROFESSOR. - because the most interesting thing about anybody in this room is where you are - that part of where you are that isn't where you think you are.

FEMALE STUDENT. Oh my God---Does that rhyme, Professor?

MALE STUDENT. That's silly.

FEMALE STUDENT. That rhymes!

MALE STUDENT. That's so silly!

PROFESSOR. Now that's REALLY silly - *invented frantic behavior* - Then again, if you think that's silly...Better think it through again. From the beginning. One more time. One more time. One more time! (101)

As the above descriptions indicate, each moment was defined, set apart, and finely tuned. The use of highly contrasted pacing, intensity, sound and movement helped clarify the immediate arrival of the next moment as the previous one was destroyed. Our staging combined with Foreman's non-linear dialogue and the steady parade of props the script called for made the production unlike anything I know to have been done in Edmonton. The play, at times was quite relaxing/hypnotic, while at others frantic and chaotic. The piece, however, did project a unity in its situation and while not clarifying a specific meaning, gave the impression that everything happening was intentional and controlled/chosen. The audiences



appeared to be engrossed in the events, excited by the show and the associations it created for them. No one complained of being bored.

The function of Foreman's theatre is aimed at empowering the individual to interpret anew the events before her/him. For each member of the audience the play is a very personal experience. This importance of encouraging individual interpretation created an interesting challenge for us in promoting the show. We could not offer easy definitions of the expected reception and hence reviewers and audiences alike had to be left to their own devices.

After each performance we had a small bar set up at the rear of the room and welcomed the audience to meet with us and give feedback. There I learned that a couple of audience members saw the show more than once because they found the experience completely different from what they were used to. An audience member told me after one performance that he had been reading a lot of chaos theory and was very excited by how much the show was an expression of the struggle of order versus chaos. A few audience members picked up on the issue of sexual politics within the play and I was surprised by how many said it reminded them of their workplace. These sentiments came from the minority of the audience who felt compelled to try to articulate their thoughts immediately following the show. The majority gave a general comment of 'well done' or 'very enjoyable' or 'trippy.' Over-all, the audiences enjoyed the show, they laughed at its humour and for the most part were concentrating very hard to try to catch everything happening. Even though some of our audiences were quite small, no one walked out during our shows.

As the producer/director of the show, I was asked on several occasions what the show was about. Over time I developed a few short responses to the question. For instance, I





would say it was about a professor and two students and provide a provocative comparison like suggesting it was like a surreal version of David Mamet's *Oleanna* or Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson*. I also found it useful to describe non-linear theatre, especially plays like Foreman's without a discernable plot, by using a musical reference saying that if the show were a song; even though the music may be wonderful, where it involves you and may even carry you away - there is no 'melody' to hum on the way home. These short examples are some of the ways I would describe the play to potential audience members having months to prepare an answer to their questions. The local media were also faced with the challenge of describing the show but had a much shorter period in which to fulfill that challenge.

Overall, the media were very supportive of this project in the amount of space and attention they gave us. There were previews and reviews with pictures in *The Edmonton Journal*, *Vue Weekly*, and *See Magazine*. We were featured, complete with a picture, in an article in *The National Post*, and we had interviews on A-Channel and CJSR radio. I found it interesting to compare the enthusiastic reporting of the concepts behind the production and Foreman's type of theatre in the previews with the reactions to the show itself and the attempts to describe in the reviews what has been designed to defy description.

The following discussion will highlight some of the responses by the local media to the challenge of describing Foreman's ideas to our local Edmonton community. Gilbert Bouchard, in his preview of *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* for *See Magazine* entitled, "Classroom Goes Berserk In Avant-garde Theatre" described the situation of the play with: "In Foreman's universe, the power relations in question are represented by the interaction of a professor and two students in a non-traditional classroom. The element of the random is



provided by four laboratory-coated gnomes (befitting “experimental” theatre) whose only role is to disrupt the action” (8). He also says elsewhere in the article that: “The show promises to provide even Edmonton’s over-stimulated theatre audiences with a fresh deconstruction of the theatrical process” (8). Bouchard alludes to the idea of power relations within the play and provides more attention to this show’s place in Edmonton’s theatre landscape and who Richard Foreman is.

As opposed to Bouchard’s detached but informative preview, Carey Toane’s review is an emotional response to the specific sights and sounds of the play and how they problematize the creation of an easy message/point or “meaning.” Her last sentence regarding the point of drawing one’s own conclusions is the pivotal thought in her review for *See Magazine* entitled “Don’t Look For Meaning In *Sledgehammer*”:

‘Imagine a play called *fingers alert*. What could happen in such a play?’ The gnomes and the humans are suddenly fixated on their squirming, pulsing digits, as their eyes widen and their voices morph into growls and squeaks. ...The non-linear action and the abstract movement of this show will have you worried. Audience members are certain to feel they’re missing the point somehow. If you realize the point is to draw your own conclusions you’re free to relax and enjoy the ride. (16)

Paul Matwychuk, who wrote both the preview and review for *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* for *Vue Weekly*, took more liberties in his interpretation of the show. In the preview, based on an interview with José Teodoro (Male Student) and myself entitled, “It’s *Hammer* Time For Owen - Play abandons linear plot for sake of giant gnomes,” he described the play thus: “Owen describes the story as a kind of ‘dada *Oleanna*.’ It’s set in a sort of



combination classroom and laboratory where a professor and two students debate various heady issues. But their conversation is being monitored by a group of gigantic invisible gnomes, who periodically invade the room and re-arrange their reality” (33). Matwychuk opted to utilize the more readily accessible reference to *Oleanna* as well as provide a brief description of what the audiences could expect to see. When it came to the review of the show entitled, “All In His *Head* - Brilliant or stupid? Your guess is as good as ours” Matwychuk cheerfully summed up his challenge as a reviewer by writing, “This is the kind of Dadaist play that cheerfully defies all attempts to criticize or even explain it” (30). Matwychuk acutely defines that major aspect of Foreman’s theatre that sets it apart from commercial/linear theatre by saying that Foreman “couldn’t care less about plot or character or theme; he’s out to change theatregoers’ viewing habits and undermine their assumptions about what theatre ought to offer them” (30). Matwychuk, while stating Foreman’s agenda, criticizes the show for lacking specific political content. He goes on to say that: “If *Sledgehammer* is out to make any kind of a statement, it’s that the possibilities of theatre are endless: a character can have power one moment, and none at all the next. Ideas can be introduced and abandoned at the drop of a hat. A horse can even appear suddenly in someone’s arms” (30). While the main purpose of Foreman’s theatre *is* to demonstrate “that the possibilities of theatre are endless” there seems to be a mixed message from Matwychuk regarding Foreman’s political intent. I feel Paul Matwychuk sees *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* as lacking in political content the same way that Richard Foreman does in that there is no *position* taken, although there are political issues inherent in the situation of this play and other plays of Foreman’s. Foreman intentionally avoids clarifying a position/message





in his plays whereas I interpret Matwychuk's review as feeling a political position was avoided or ignored in this production. Matwychuk understood and articulated very well that the "statement" within the play was found in questioning the ways of perceiving but fell short of recognizing the political reverberations of that questioning.

A week prior to the opening of the show, Heidi Taylor, Elyne Quan and I met with Liz Nichols, the theatre writer for *The Edmonton Journal* who wrote both the preview and review of the show. Her preview entitled, "Manual Transmission Goes Avant-Garde - Step in to the Third Space and into the world of the unexpected" gave a lengthy description of Richard Foreman and his work and then launched into details pertaining to the Manual Transmission production of *My Head Was A Sledgehammer*. Nichols's solution to the challenge of reporting on this piece and the form of theatre it represented - which was heretofore foreign to the Edmonton theatre community - was to concentrate on the motivation of our company to produce Foreman's work. She wrote, "What attracts Taylor to Foreman is 'his combination of non-linear content and formality in visual construction. Both the physicality and the design are quite precise - and a whole lot of fun. There isn't causality, but there's a certain momentum'" (C4). She continued by saying, "Owen's interest was piqued by Foreman's theories about the theatre 'as a mental gymnasium' where the audience's individual minds are freed to embrace every kind of lateral association. He thinks of the New York artist as 'a sort of post-modern Dadaist who brings in everything from pop culture.' He figures that Foreman's musical counterpart is Philip Glass" (C4). Nichols dealt with the challenge of priming the potential audience for a non-linear experience by choosing to report on our company's mutual goal with Foreman to "free the audience's minds to



embrace every kind of lateral association.”

Liz Nichols’ review in *The Edmonton Journal* answered the challenge of describing Foreman’s play by providing a side-bar summary of Foreman’s career to help provide some context and legitimacy for the readers. The focus she took in the preview of concentrating on my company’s motivations for bringing this non-linear work to Edmonton was also evident in her review of the show a week later entitled, “Tease Your Cerebral Side - My Head Was A Sledgehammer perfectly suited for short attention spans” where she wrote the following:

The scholars natter on, trying solemnly, and need I add with spectacular futility, to address the Big philosophical questions - human existence, the nature of time, the relationship of theatre, language, and life, the meaning of rhyme. Meanwhile, as illustrated by the gnomes, you see the scholars’ world manipulated, in even its most prosaic details, by mysterious and quirky forces wearing knee-pads and silly hats. (C4)

Her written reaction to the play combined a description of the spectacle as well as the philosophical/existential content of the piece. Unlike Matwychuk, she did not seek to define the politics of the piece. Instead she advocated how the non-linear/unexpected qualities of the piece undermined the audience’s assumptions regarding theatre and in turn presented new creative avenues.

Nichol’s article spawned some national attention and sections of it were incorporated in the article, “Taking a Sledgehammer to Gnomes and Deconstructionists”, complete with a picture in Canada’s *other* national newspaper. The following is from *The National Post*:

Director David Owen hems his cast of three humans and four giant gnomes in a black-lined box. Its parameters are defined, boxing ring fashion, by string, and lit by high-



intensity bare bulbs. The only set pieces are bare-bones office stuff, a desk and a bookcase. But there are props - homely objects like apples, baguettes, a violin and bow, glasses of water. And they arrive in human hands, or on human feet, by the swift comic intervention of gnomes who constitute a cross between chorus and pointy-headed stage managers, annotating proceedings by facial expression (or lack thereof), gesture, or physical action.” (D5)

This description, again, describes the concrete aspects of the show and emphasizes the unexpected qualities of the piece. The exposure was good for us as a company but also in introducing Foreman to Canadian audiences and helping to promote non-linear theatre here.

My goal was not to *make* a political statement with the show other than to expand the minds of the audience - to put them through their paces in my mental gymnasium - but the material was presented and available for political interpretations of all kinds. Indeed, several people did comment on the power games they witnessed onstage just as one audience member was ecstatic that the show was about chaos theory and another audience member said it reminded them of the politics at their workplace. A large part of why I wanted to do Foreman’s play was to see how audiences would react to it. I was very pleased by seeing those audience members who were very excited by the show but was also shown how strong the oppressive structures of predicted consequences are in our society. I expected a somewhat more rigorous and sophisticated reaction to what was produced onstage but then I have been involved with, and seek out, non-linear theatre and am more accustomed to articulating my reactions to it. The reactions we did receive show how the interpretations of Foreman’s work are very personal, according to the associations and meanings created by



individual audience members from the experience of each successive moment. Ultimately, the greatest challenge in directing Foreman's work was *not* to clarify each moment to "mean" something but to focus each moment to bring out its inherent potential possibilities.





# Conclusion

This thesis explores the theory and practice of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, one of the most important North American avant-garde theatres to have emerged in the late twentieth century and one which is still actively producing today under the guidance of its founder, Richard Foreman. As discussed, the unique theoretical core of Foreman's style of theatre is that it isolates and frustrates the impulse of each moment, moment after moment, to allow the audience to know the "reality" of their experience (ontological) prior to being able to easily assimilate the experience into the constructed framework given them by society (the hysterical present).

Chapter one delved into the ideas behind the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre and analyzed how Foreman took the ideas he gained from them to inform the writing, directing and design of his work. My purpose was to establish the context in which to understand his three manifestos, his desire to "wake-up" the minds of his audience, and to explore the "political" merit of his experimental approach.

As described in chapter two, this desire is still strong thirty years later although Foreman's theatre is no longer supported as it was the liberal '60s and '70s but is up against the conservative and corporate dominated society of the 1990s. The 'saving power' of Foreman's theatre is needed now more than ever as indicated by the steady stream of awards he has been receiving. However, despite the awards and the number of interns who attend the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre School, it must also be admitted that his audiences are getting smaller. Foreman has often created and toured work in Europe and continues to take



his work to international audiences there, but has recently also found the need to tour in America as a source of revenue since funding for the arts has become more difficult to secure.

Foreman, now that he is sixty-two, is very interested in seeing other directors tackle his work and ideas. Perhaps this is to ensure the continuation of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre and to have Foreman's influence reach further than he and his theatre school are able to. This impetus has spawned the ForemanFest and helps to encourage fledgling companies such as my own Manual Transmission Theatre in Edmonton to produce his work.

The opportunity to produce and direct the Canadian premiere of *My Head Was A Sledgehammer* was a terrific boon not only for myself and the company but also for the Edmonton/Albertan audience who may not otherwise have had the chance to see work of this nature. As chapter three described, it was a tremendous challenge and a rewarding learning experience to see a play of Foreman's develop in rehearsal and go to full production. It was also a chance for me to test the ideas of Foreman's that I had learned through performance. I had never seen Foreman's work in performance and was extremely curious to witness its effect on an audience. This experience provided me with great insight into the power of presenting the ever-present onstage and encouraging the play of possibilities rather than a linear narrowing of a specific message/moral. It was the few audience members that were excited by our production - whose imaginations were engaged and whose minds were racing afterward - who made me realize fully the importance of this work.

Foreman's theatre is designed to empower the imagination of the individual to enable her/him to be aware of the many possibilities inherent in every moment. I feel Foreman is an intellectual anarchist in that he wants to strip away society's rules that enframe our vision of



the world and ‘reality’ in order to provide the ‘saving power’ that enables the perception of an alternative to the ‘reality’ enframed by society. He wants to give the members of his audience a hyper-awareness that they wouldn’t receive from most other theatre. The question remains as to *why* Foreman has taken this task upon himself to create the ‘saving-power’ for society. Foreman has said he is doing his theatre for himself and then offering it to anybody else “that might be encouraged by it” (Davy 183). What sort of encouragement is Foreman intending to promote? The key to understanding the political agenda behind Foreman’s art is the need to question. The theatre of realism and psychological drama are dead for Foreman and ‘lull the audience to sleep’ because they teach conformity. Stage realism was originally intended to *re-present* ‘reality’ onstage but now simply presents ‘reality.’ According to Baudrillard there is no referent for ‘reality’ to be *re-presented* and therefore the ‘truth’ that realism aims to imitate is itself, a simulation. Foreman’s theatre teaches freedom of thought in that it encourages the audience to question their own perception and creation of ‘reality.’ Those who are encouraged by Foreman’s theatre are those who embrace deeper questioning and insight. While some may wish to reject Foreman’s theatre for its lack of plot and logic and do not wish to disturb the construction of ‘reality’ provided them by society.

Foreman’s theatre, though winning awards, is dealing with dwindling audiences and problems of funding in these conservative times. Revolutionary ideas lose their momentum, especially for theatre like his that aims at empowering the individual to question. In this current consumerist society, Foreman’s theatre is working at not creating good consumers out of his audience members. Good consumers don’t question, they conform. Heidegger said that “questioning is the piety of thought” (35) whereas in the world created in George





Orwell's *1984*, questioning is thought-crime. It is in this light that Foreman's theatre holds what Heidegger called the "saving power" for society in that questioning can take the one who questions out of an enframed view of the world. Heidegger said, "The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become" (35). It is in the consumerist corporate world that Foreman's theatre is finding it harder to survive. Foreman has had to commodify his theatre by placing his shows on tour to survive. In Orwell's scenario the government is in control, in millennial North America, however, it is the corporations, as Foreman has stated in his speeches (naming culprits like Disney). It is with great and intentional irony that Foreman toured the show *Pearls for Pigs* to 'anonymous' audiences across America and it is with this same self-conscious irony that Garrett said in her review, "these specific problems framing the play are also framed within the play, which mocks itself, mocks the audience, mocks the author, mocks the audience" (*Theater* 16). The play mocks because it is designed to teach freedom of thought but is packaged to be consumed and discarded. Questioning encouraged by the play queries its own situation. While it is no surprise that Foreman works so often in more politically sophisticated Europe, he has recently noted that the conservative climate is becoming dominant there as well.

Foreman's political agenda is to empower the individual to question and truly think/experience without the safety/containment-net of society's conventions. I think the reason he continues to pursue this goal today with no signs of stopping is because he values the right to question and wants to provide an outlet for others who also value intellectual freedom. In this light it is easier to understand why his theatre has sometimes been described



as a spiritual experience and why Foreman has said he has always felt that he is a closet religious writer (*Unbalancing Acts* 5). It is because I place the same value on the right to question that I am prompted to seek out the work I do in the theatre, especially the work of Foreman which proved to be so rewarding and reinforcing for me as an artist. Heidegger was right in noting that “questioning is the piety of thought” (35).



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